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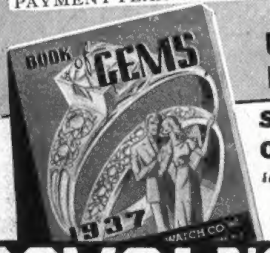

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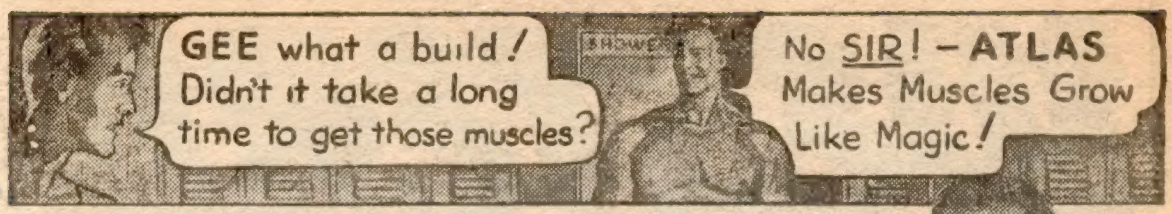

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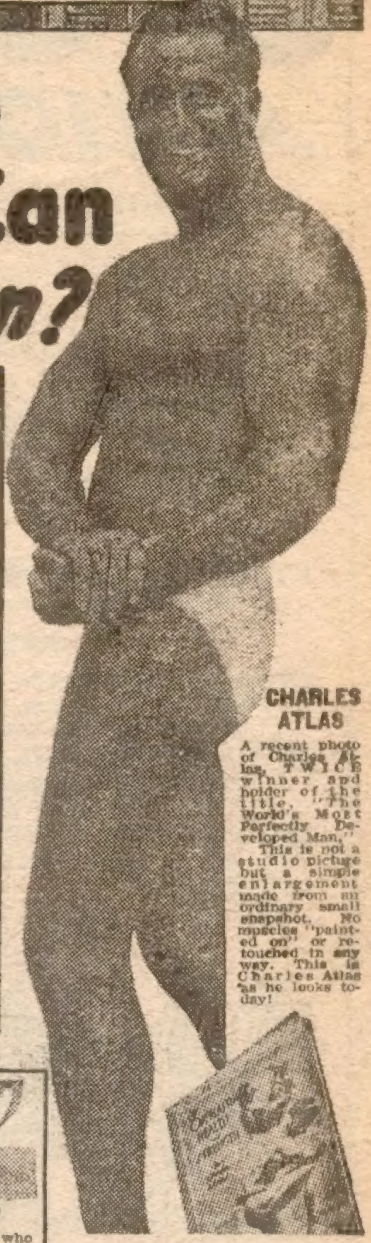

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WESTERN ACTION NOVELS Magazine

ALL STORIES NEW — ALL STORIES COMPLETE

Vol. III, No. 4 — *September, 1937, Issue*

CONTENTS

TWO ACTION PACKED NOVELS

QUICK TRIGGERS . . . . . **Frank C. Robertson** 6
When hired gunmen stole the grazing lands, and turned their smoke-poles in his direction, Yates Trego tied down his holsters and called for a trigger showdown.

GUNSLICK . . . . . **Cliff Campbell** 46
Up from Texas came Lone Star Bill Ryan to match his wits and guns against as dirty a pack of plug-uglies as ever dry-gulched a waddy.

A ROARING NOVELETTE

KILL THAT SHEEPHERDER . . . . . **Brian Loomis** 116
Shearin' sheep is trouble, don't ever let no one tell yuh different.

THREE SMASHING SHORT STORIES

GUNLESS GUNMAN . . . . . **E. B. Mann** 39
Clay McLean buckles on the old man's guns and shows that it takes more than bluster to prove courage.

HOT LEAD SHOWDOWN . . . . . **Guy Arnold** 102
It was hell on wheels that followed Hi Emerson's order, "Get out of town by dawn, or by Gawd, I'll shoot yuh on sight!"

BILL ON TWILIGHT . . . . . **Gil Gilrain** 110
Bullets fly fast and furious when outlaws start trouble with quick-shooting buckaroos.

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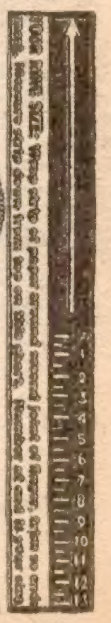

Though Trego stood on weakened legs, his gun hand was steady as a rock.

When hired gunmen stole the grazing lands, and turned their smoke-poles in his direction, Yates Trego tied down his holsters, called for a trigger showdown, and fought to a fare-you-well with every coyote on the range.

CHAPTER I

THREE AGAINST ONE

INSTINCTIVELY the three riders paused for a moment at their first view of the town for nearly six months.

"Well," Yates Trego remarked, "it don't look like the old town has winter-killed."

"But she's a whole lot safer for us now that the Warbonnet outfit has sold out an' Charley Loose an' his tough outfit have migrated," grinned the man in the center. They called him "Reckless" Reese, and he was always grinning. His face was built that way, he contended.

"Frankly, that is a relief," Yates Trego,

QUICK TRIGGERS

by FRANK C. ROBERTSON

A ROARING ACTION-PACKED NOVEL OF GUN-PLAY ON THE RANGE

the employer of the other two admitted candidly.

They started on. They had not gone three rods, however, before Steve Bolivar, the third man suddenly grasped Trego's bridle-rein and pointed his finger toward the town. "Look!" he exclaimed.

The other two followed with their eyes the direction of the pointing finger. The grin upon Reckless' face seemed fixed there by an unbending process of nature, but a troubled look overspread the features of Yates Trego.

"And we thought they'd gone," the latter murmured. "But there can't be any doubt about it. Those horses belong to Charley Loose and the rest of the Warbonnet outfit."

"I wonder what they are back here for," Reckless murmured, with his perpetual grin. "They ain't no Warbonnet outfit any more, an' they was supposed to leave this country."

The dark-skinned Bolivar glanced pityingly at his pal. "He wants to know why that bunch of hard-boiled range yeggs have come back here. Yates, can you explain it to him in words of one syllable, or less, that they've probably come back here to keep that threat Charley Loose made last fall to git us fellers?"

"They've nothing against you boys; just me," Trego remonstrated.

"We're with you, anyway," Bolivar insisted. "There ain't a joint of grass nor a sage-hen track in this country that them bozos don't know. The Warbonnet outfit was sold out last fall, lock, stock, an' barrel. Them fellers are back here for no other reason than to git you, Yates."

Any stranger could have told that Yates Trego was the leader of the trio. His strong, rugged features; far from pretty, and yet by no means ugly, were those of a man eminently sure of himself. Trego was a man always ready to go more than half the way to be fair, but few tried to impose upon him twice. He was as loyal to his men as they were to him, and the result was that either of them would follow him to hell if he had so much as asked them.

"No, I don't think that's it," he stated quietly. "I made Charley Loose powerful mad last fall, and he did indulge in some loose — say, that's a pun — talk about bumpin' me off if I ever crossed his trail again. But he wouldn't stay mad *that* long."

"Wouldn't he?" Reckless asked, grinning widely. "Why, I stopped an old galoot from beatin' his wife five years ago, an' he's still sore about it, an' so's the old lady. An' it's only been six months since you stopped Charley Loose from gittin' away with a clean steal of five thousand cows. I bet he still remembers it."

"It oughta be a lesson to you, Reckless, not to come between husband an' wife," Yates said sternly. "A bastin' or two might have done the old girl good. But I couldn't let Charley git away with a barefaced steal by chasin' part of his herd around a knoll and countin' 'em again an' again. Someway, it wasn't *honest*."

"Yo're dang right it wasn't honest," Steve Bolivar said nervously. "Charley Loose an' his men had planned for years on makin' that grand little clean-up. It would probably have meant ten thonsand a-piece to every one of 'em. An' you spoiled the whole thing in ten seconds because you happened to spot one muley cow with a lump on her jaw that went past you twice. Charley Loose is a killer, an' so is half of his men—an' the other half is anxious to learn. They didn't dare call you then, but that's what they're here for now."

"You're wrong about there bein' just one muley cow," Trego said provokingly. "I just mentioned that one as proof, but as a matter of fact I had recognized more than fifty head before that."

Bolivar could stand the strain no longer.

"That don't matter," he said, his voice becoming a trifle shrill in spite of himself. "Do we ride down there now an' git bumped off, or pretend that we've got business elsewhere?"

THROUGHOUT the colloquy the expression on Reckless' face had not changed. His bad, uneven teeth, called attention to his constant grin, and gave some the impression that he wasn't smart. That was a mistake. But both Yates Trego and Steve Bolivar knew that when it came to trouble Reckless was there and over.

"Why don't you let me go down an' smile on 'em?" he suggested now. "If they kick my pants out of the saloon you'll know they're just here for amusement. If I don't come out you'll know they're lookin' for trouble."

"No; we'll ride down together," Trego said steadily. "They won't start a gang fight without some notice. And if Loose means to make it a personal issue with me we'd as well have it over with."

"Be plumb sure your hardware is in workin' order," Bolivar said anxiously. "Loose is the slickest proposition with a gun that ever hit the country."

"My hardware is always ready," Trego answered. "I hope I don't have to use it."

The town of Juniper was built at the foot of an abrupt hillside which at the top sloped gently back to the foothills in the form of a low mesa. The town itself was not yet twenty years old, but because of the dry, thin atmosphere which was fatal to paint it looked drab and ancient. Outside of a somewhat crooked main street at the foot of the hill, lined by board sidewalks on each side in front of false-fronted business houses, the rest of the houses sprangled anyway they pleased. Anyone attempting to find definite streets would have only found a headache.

From where the three men had stopped they could look down almost upon the roof of the GAMBLERS' REST, the saloon in front of which the group of Warbonnet horses stood. The three took a trail which was little more than a clay slide, and came to a halt at the bottom not more than fifty feet from where the horses stood eyeing them curiously.

Yates Trego alone of the three had wit-

nessed a man standing on the opposite sidewalk remove a red handkerchief from his hip pocket, flirt it ostentatiously, and then disappear into a store. Trego guessed that the man had been a spotter for the crew of half outlaws in the other saloon. Yet when they rode on up the street to another saloon there was no sign from the GAMBLERS REST.

The three went into the OWL saloon and had a drink; Bolivar drinking whisky; the other two small beers.

"Know Charley Loose is back in town?" the barkeep queried.

"Yeh, we noticed his horse when we come in. Mighty fine nag, that gray he rides," Yates answered.

"Yeh. Charley always has the best, from the horse he rides to the gun he packs," the barkeep insinuated.

Trego gave the man a glance but offered no comment, and the man lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. The three riders went out, and instantly the saloon buzzed with comment behind them.

"If you fellers value a whole hide you'll stick close inside for the next few minutes," the bartender offered. "Charley Loose was never known to make a promise he didn't keep, an' last fall he said that some day he'd kill Yates Trego. If I don't miss my guess that's what he aims to do today."

"An' knowin' Yates like I do," vouchsafed another, "I know he'll never run. An' with them two wildcats to back him up there'll be plenty of gun throwin' on both sides."

"But the odds are three against eleven," remarked another man. "Trego is a crazy fool if he steps foot inside the GAMBLERS REST."

"And if he don't everybody will think he's afraid to, an' Loose will come huntin' him," the bartender said. "Ten dollars to one Trego goes into our rival establishment within the hour."

"Gittin' high-toned in his grammar, ain't he?" a man scoffed. "Next thing he'll be callin' *this* dump a saloon."

But there were no takers of the barkeep's offer.

Meanwhile the three riders went quietly about their necessary shopping, talking casually about the weather and the range with the few people who seemed to have time to talk with them. Trego was casual; Reckless continued to grin; Bolivar being the only one who displayed signs of strain, and this was visible only in his quick, furtive glance and a pinched look around his nostrils.

Their little shopping tour had brought them close to the GAMBLERS REST when a young woman dressed in a gray riding habit stepped out of a doorway. She was about twenty-two; old enough to be sure of herself. Her abundant corn-colored hair was partially concealed by a man's dusty sombrero, and she wore gauntlet gloves upon her strong, brown hands. Level blue eyes looked out from a strong, rather than a pretty face, though the girl wasn't without beauty. At sight of the men a smile illumined her face, but her appearance, it seemed to Yates Trego, had been a little too pat to have been entirely accidental.

"Why, Yates Trego!" she exclaimed in mild astonishment, "this is lucky meeting you here. Hello, Steve. Hello, Reckless."

Trego accepted the girl's outstretched hand, and she shook hands with the other two boys more casually.

"It's always lucky for me meetin' you, Helen," Yates smiled, "but it never occurred to me that you might feel the same way about it."

A BIT of color swept over Helen Malone's fresh cheeks.

"What I meant was that Father asked me to send a message to you, and now I can deliver it in person."

Trego inclined his head gravely. "I'm always glad to receive any word or advice from Judge Malone," he stated.

"He wants to see you at once if he can. Something very important has come up. Will you ride out to the ranch with me now?" Her tone was urgent.

"I'll be glad to—in just a few minutes," the man said. "I have a call or two to make yet."

"In there?" The girl nodded briefly toward the saloon.

"Well, maybe."

"That's just why I want you to go with me right now."

"I'm afraid——"

"No, I'm not just trying to keep you out of trouble," the girl interrupted. "It's about Charley Loose that Father wants to see you. Loose is starting something about the old Warbonnet range that you and Father should talk over."

"I see. But I will have to step into the GAMBLERS REST a minute before I

start. I see your horse down the street. Will you wait for me there?"

Helen Malone's manner did not change outwardly, except that she somewhat nervously wet her lips with the tip of a pink tongue, and impulsively placed her hand momentarily upon Trego's arm.

"Yes, I'll wait for you," she promised, and went on down the street, but her face was pale. She knew Western men, this girl, and she knew Yates Trego would not be stopped when it would be a reflection upon his courage. Nor, being the kind of girl she was, would she want to stop him.

The men waited until she had reached her horse. Trego's companions knew that their leader was waiting for the girl to get out of range of possible bullets. Then they turned and matter of factly passed through the swinging doors which they had ample reason to believe they might never return through again—alive.

CHAPTER II
THE CONQUERING GRIN

FOR men who had been waiting inside a saloon for several hours the former Warbonnet crew were strangely sober. The iron discipline of the square-jawed ex-foreman, Charley Loose, was perhaps responsible. Loose was a man whose hints few refused to take. Five foot ten in height, loosely built and rangey, the man carried a suggestion of great strength and durability. His lean face, inclined to arrogance, carried the calm assurance achieved only by ripe experience.

Just now Loose was seated at a table against the wall talking to a local cowman. Two of his men were seated at the same table, while others were scattered around in various parts of the saloon. But Yates Trego noticed the instant he entered that Hash Middleton, next to Loose the most dangerous gunman of the crew, lounged at one end of the bar where he commanded a sweeping view of the whole barroom and of the door. At the other end of the bar, in only a slightly less strategic position lounged a smallish fellow with straw-colored hair and dead looking, whitish eyes who was known for his waspish temper and readiness to resort to gun or knife play. He was called Marco St. Cloud, and was less dangerous than the other two only because he was smaller. There were some who believed that with a gun he could shade either of them, and he had the further advantage of being a practiced knife-thrower.

It was not a comfortable situation for a man whom these men had threatened to kill to walk into, but outwardly Yates Trego was as calm as he had been while talking to Helen Malone, while Reckless Reese's face was fixed in his perpetual grin. Only Steve Bolivar betrayed the slightest sense of nervousness.

The only space at the bar was next to Marco St. Cloud, and it so happened that Steve Bolivar was the one who brushed elbows with the gunman. The three nodded to the bartender, who rested both hands on the bar in front of them in an attitude of waiting. The man was tense.

"We'll have three beers," Trego ordered quietly. Then he half turned and appeared to notice Charley Loose for the first time.

"Hello, Charley," he called in a tone that seemed to ring with genuine affability. "Join us in a drink?"

Loose had ceased to talk the moment the others entered the saloon. His look had been frigid. Now he suddenly found himself disconcerted by the unexpected manner of his foe's greeting. He was not ready to precipitate a conflict, but he had to do it or play up to the other's game. The faces of his men reflected their surprise when he got up and walked toward the bar. But in a moment he had regained his self-possession, and his easy manner matched Trego's.

"Maybe I will," he said, emphasizing the last word.

Reckless Reese suddenly gave his neighbor an elbow thrust and cleared a space for loose between himself and Trego. Again Loose realized that he had been outgeneraled.

"What'll you have, Charley?" Yates asked.

"Whisky."

The bartender gingerly placed the drinks on the bar. Loose fingered his whisky glass with his left hand, but he didn't drink.

"Still herdin' dogeys I hear," the latter remarked.

"Yep."

"If somebody ever dies an' wills me a couple of Jersey calves I'll hire you to herd 'em."

"That'll be fine," Trego said, calmly ignoring the sneer. "There's lots of range now that the Warbonnet has sold out. I'll be glad to herd any dogeys you may have —at fifty cents a month."

"Yes?" There was a perceptible rising edge in Loose's voice. "That's where you're mistaken, my friend. There'll be no additional range for you."

"Says which?" Trego queried, eyebrows uplifted.

"I was sayin' that I'm still holdin' the range that the Warbonnet used when I was foreman, an' that there'll be no Mormon cows allowed between Paradise an' the Five Mile Meadows."

"Nor Mormon cowpunchers," abruptly spoke up Hash Middleton from the other end of the bar.

"Well!" Trego toyed with his glass of beer. Nobody had touched glass to lip. Apparently Trego was slightly amused. He was accustomed to having the animals he tended referred to as Mormon dogeys, and, frequently, himself as a Mormon. He didn't mind, though the terms were grossly inaccurate.

Five years before, knowing of the unused range along the Bear River, but having no money to buy cattle, and with an ingrained prejudice against going into debt, Yates Trego had hit upon the idea of running summer herds upon the free public domain. Most of the animals he secured did belong to Mormon ranchers in the Snake River settlements. Thus he had acquired the name of being a Mormon. The proposition he had made the small ranchers, Mormon and Gentile alike, was much better than they could have run their cattle for themselves, and with it went a guarantee of a full count.

It was not long until it required three men to handle his charges, and he had hired Steve and Reckless. And he could have obtained three times as many cattle as he did have if he could secure range. The passing of the big Warbonnet outfit had seemed to afford that opportunity. He was taking on more cattle, and right now he had men employed gathering animals from the lower valleys.

CHARLEY LOOSE'S threat had come like a bolt from the blue, and Trego realized that if it was made the consequences would be disastrous indeed.

"Am I to understand that you've gone into the dogey herdin' business in competition with me?" he asked gently.

"No"—Loose could afford to smile broadly now—"I ain't sunk that low. I still run a *cow* outfit."

"Oh, well, I guess it's a case of every man for himself," Trego stated. "I've taken several thousand head of young stuff for the summer, and I'm sure figgerin' on usin' some of the range that the Warbonnet vacated. I've never heard of 'em sellin' that range, an' bein' free government land I don't see how they could."

"An' I'm tellin' you not to bring any more dogeys into the country," Loose declared flatly. "I'm still runnin' the range I used to. I mean to keep on runnin' it."

Trego lifted his glass of beer to mouth, and signalled his men to do likewise. Loose deliberately shoved his glass of whisky toward the back of the bar. Then, as Steve Bolivar jerkily lifted his glass, he accidentally jabbed Marco St. Cloud in the ribs with his elbow.

Instantly the waspish gunman leaped away from the bar with a hissing sound like a cat's.

"You can't jab me around, you so-and-such," the fellow hissed. "I'll cut yore blankey-blank heart out!"

A knife appeared in the fellow's hand and he leaped forward, making a wicked slash at Steve Bolivar.

Steve's hand dropped toward his gun, but realizing that he had no time for that he raised his hands and tried to fend himself until he could grab the knife.

The first slash left a long red channel down Steve's arm. The puncher thrust his assailant back a step, but St. Cloud came in again like a flash before Steve could move to defend himself. Steve would have died had it not been for Yates Trego. Before the fellow could stab or slash again Trego's booted foot came up in a free swing from the hip. His toe caught the killer a paralyzing blow just below the elbow. The knife was knocked high in the air and St. Cloud grabbed his arm with an involuntary cry of pain.

It had happened so suddenly that there had been a moment when nobody moved. Even Charley Loose seemed to have been caught by surprise. Then the man's hand flashed to the handle of his gun in the beginning of the fast draw for which he was famous. But before the gun was quite clear of the holster Loose felt a gun muzzle

pressed against the small of his back.

"Let it drop, Charley," purred a voice, and glancing back over his shoulder Loose looked into the grinning face of Reckless Reese. He let go of the gun.

"Thanks," Reckless said.

Discomfited by having been outwitted by a man not half so fast on the draw as he was the Warbonnet foreman could only swear under his breath. But the pressure against his back was not decreased.

From wherever they happened to be in the saloon Loose's men had started up; their hands clutching wickedly at the handles of their guns. Hash Middleton, at the farther end of the bar, was the only one who had unholstered his gun completely. The men between him and Reckless had dropped below the level of the bar, but before Middleton could fire, Charley Loose bawled out,

"Stop!"

Acutely conscious of the fact that the next hostile move would send a bullet into his kidneys the foreman had reason to check his men. Awareness that he had been outgamed and out-maneuvered, the man seethed internally; but he was not courting death for the sake of dignity.

"Your boys seem kinda touchy, Charley." Trego said. "We don't want any trouble. You feel the same way about it?"

"Sure, I don't want no trouble," Loose said grudgingly. "Relax, boys."

Slowly the men's hands fell away from their weapons. Trego smiled and started for the door with Steve Bolivar by his side. Reckless remained where he was; his grin seeming to have a peculiar fascination for the men who watched him. But the hand that held the gun against Loose's back never wavered.

At the door Trego and Bolivar turned back and faced the room. They didn't touch their guns, but stood there, waiting. Reckless calmly holstered his gun, gave Loose a friendly pat on the arm, and walked toward his friends.

Yates Trego's eyes never left Charley Loose's face. He knew that the odds against Loose drawing his gun were small. The man had been humiliated, and now he had an even chance again. Better than an even chance, since he had ten men at his back against his enemy's three, and, moreover, he believed himself to be the fastest man in the country on the draw. Trego realized this, but with iron self control he kept his hands at his sides and gazed at his foes with an air of serene confidence. Steve Bolivar followed his example.

The muscles of Loose's face twitched like an addict needing morphine, but he didn't draw. When Reckless reached the others they backed through the door and into the street unmolested.

"I shore got to hand it to you, Yates," Reckless said, his grin widening a bit. "If you'd showed the least excitement Charley Loose would have started throwin' lead."

"Me?" Trego queried in surprise. "I was scared to death. You were the cool one. Keepin' Loose covered was a big help, but it was that monkey grin of yours that really made 'em afraid to start anything. That grin said plainer than words,

" 'No matter what you do we've got you whipped before you start.' An' damned if they didn't believe it."

"Then for once," Reckless said, "I'm damned glad I can't breathe through my nose."

CHAPTER III

—OR ELSE

YATES TREGO noticed Helen Malone still waiting for him beside her horse when he came out of the saloon.

"You boys go see the doctor and git that knife cut on Steve's arm doctored up. Then get back to camp if Steve is able to travel, and keep out of the way of the Warbonnet outfit," Trego directed.

"I'll be able to travel all right," Steve said. "This looks like a long cut, but it don't feel deep. Some day I'll git a hold of that dead-eyed knife slinger an' break him in two."

"I'll bet he's got as sore an arm as you have," Reckless said. "Did you hear it crack when Yates' toe hit him?"

"It was a closer squeak than I care to have," Trego admitted.

"But what about it?" Steve demanded. "If he does try to hold all the old Warbonnet range what'll you do?"

"He can't hold it. It's a bluff," Trego said. But in his own mind he was not so sure.

Helen came a few steps forward to meet him. Her face showed that she had been under a severe strain.

"Thank God you're out of there," she said. "I've been listening for gun shots

till my ears ached. There was no trouble?"

"Nothing serious. Marco St. Cloud pulled a knife on Steve Bolivar and cut his arm, but I managed to kick the knife out of his hand before he could do any more damage."

The girl stared with puzzled, wondering eyes.

"You saw Loose?" she questioned.

"And talked with him. He claims he still controls the Warbonnet range, and ordered me to keep off. I'm guessin' it was about that that your father wanted to see me."

"I think it was. Let's go."

She swung lithely into the saddle, and Trego knew better than to proffer any assistance. Helen Malone had handled horses since she was six years old. He would have considered it an insult to even intimate that she wasn't perfectly capable of mounting her own horse. So far as that went she seemed perfectly capable of handling her own affairs in everything.

He glanced up at her curiously as she accompanied him across the street to his horse. For five years every single man in the country had been more or less wild about her, but she had played no favorites; and it had now begun to seem that she could never take any local man seriously—and the right man from the outside apparently hadn't come along. Maybe he never would, Trego was thinking. He was sure that she had never had any deep romance in her life, and if she ever did the man would have to be somebody of pretty high station. She had made it clear that no ordinary cowhand would do.

"Did you talk to many of the local cattlemen today, or—or lately?" she questioned as they rode out of town and took the road at a jog-trot. It was dusty inside the ruts, and they rode one on each side of the road. It was, Trego thought, about as chummy as a man could get with Helen.

"Why, I saw quite a few of them here an' there today, but I was too busy to gossip much with them," he answered.

"I suppose they were all anxious to talk?"

He glanced at her with surprise. "Come to think of it they wasn't falling all over themselves to get to talk with me," he said.

It occurred to him that there had been a number of the local men inside the GAMBLER REST; most of whom he had supposed were better friends to him than to Loose. They had never had cause to love the arrogant Warbonnet outfit, and he had at some time or other done every one of them favors. Now he remembered that their attitude had been queerly strained. He hadn't expected them to take sides with him, but he had every right to think that they would give him their sympathy rather than Loose.

"I'm afraid you're losing your popularity, my friend," Helen said bluntly.

"Well, now! I didn't know I had any great amount of it to lose, but I sure don't see why my stock should go down and Loose's go up on account of what happened last fall," he said candidly.

THE girl studied him a minute before she spoke. "You are the romantic type," she said judiciously, "in spite of your size and your well known courage. You're proud of being a cowboy. You say to yourself, you Pharisee, that you are not like other men. You are the man on horseback! The king. Not for you is the sedentary life of the tenderfoot, or the daily life of the manual drudge. Free as the air! That's you. I can imagine you sitting your horse on top of some pinnacle, looking out over the wide open spaces, glorying in every breath you breathe, and thanking God that you are a cowman."

"Frankly," he said, "I don't think you're being funny, even though you smile. I think you mean it. And I'd never thought of myself as a Pharisee. In fact I've been purty proud of being just a common sort of fellow. Being told that I'm pretty much of a fool kinda takes the wind out of me."

He was hurt, and the girl knew it. She suddenly reined her horse across the road and took the brush on his side. Her hand rested lightly upon his arm.

"Don't take it that way, Yates," she begged. "I guess the bitterness inside me sort of got beyond control, and my sarcasm didn't get over. Personally, you're fine—as fine a man as I've ever known. But you *are* incurably romantic."

"I don't know why you should know that. I've never mentioned romance to you, even though there's been plenty of times when I'd like to. I knew it wouldn't be any use. But I've rode to the top of a pinnacle many a time and felt just as you say I did."

"And why haven't you made love to me?" she asked.

"I've never quite understood that myself—till now," he answered slowly.

"And now?"

"Now I know that first of all I'm a range man, and that in your heart you cherish a kind of contempt for the whole breed."

A deep flush spread over Helen Malone's face, but after a moment she forced herself to meet his gaze.

"We're being a little more frank with each other, I think, than either of us intended when we started out," she said. "I call you a fool, and you call me a snob. I'm not a snob, really; any more than you are a fool. We just don't see alike. You think these people the salt of the earth, free, big-hearted, and happy. I claim most of them are just as little, petty, and narrow-minded as anybody else, and the way they are treating you proves it."

"I don't understand. People have treated me all right. Even Charley Loose until I stepped on his toes."

"Look. Loose has brow-beaten and abused these people for years. Was there ever a questionable brand, who got away with the critter unless Yates Trego was there to stop it? Charley Loose. There hasn't been a cowman in this country who hasn't seen some of his stock claimed by the Warbonnet outfit because of a blotched brand, and had to take it. They saw Loose try to get away with a wholesale theft of cattle from the tenderfeet who bought the Warbonnet cattle last fall. After it was over they applauded you, yes. But now this spring Charley Loose comes back and makes them a few mealy-mounted promises of more range if they'll turn against you, and what do they do? They lick his boots. They say what Loose was trying to do to the tenderfeet wasn't stealing, it was just a smart trick, and you had no business ramming into it."

"But surely—"

"I know what I'm talking about," the girl interrupted heatedly. "They've been to my dad. So has Loose. They're trying to form an association against you. I've heard their smug arguments. They say they live here and pay taxes on their cattle, and that you bring in stuff from the outside to eat the grass that ought to be theirs. You've befriended them, and they'll break you. There is your noble dowman, my romantic friend."

"That's hard to believe, Helen," Trego said gently. "These men have been my friends. Maybe I have exalted 'em a little too much, in my own mind, but I can't believe they'd let Charley Loose make tools of them. What sort of an association are they trying to form?"

"I'll let Dad tell you the details," the girl said wearily. "I've had my say."

They rode on up the valley in silence, past a number of cattle ranches belonging to men who ran stock on the same range with Trego. It was these men whom the girl was trying to turn him against. She just didn't understand them.

At the end of a lane they unexpectedly encountered two small ranchers named Clark and Wentworth. Trego greeted them with unusual if artificial gusto.

"Well, I'm back in the country again," he said cordially. "Sure seems like home. How did you winter?"

"Well, we got by all right, I reckon," Lucius Clark mumbled. "Cattle's purty thin though. Goin' to take lots o' grass to git enough meat on 'em by fall to pay fer winterin' 'em."

The looks of both men were hang-dog, and their words had to be dragged out of them. Trego glanced at Helen Malone, and a flush crept over his tanned cheeks. The girl had said nothing. She was sitting quietly on her horse, but there was a visible curl to her red lips which a pretty girl shouldn't have.

"Well, glad to have met you again," Yates said to the two men. "I'll be seeing you."

THEY mumbled something unintelligible and rode hastily away.

"Well?" Helen murmured.

Certainly it wasn't such a greeting as Trego had a right to expect from men who had always professed warm friendship, but he wouldn't admit it.

"Aw, they were just embarrassed because you were present," he said.

"Them? They don't know the meaning of the word. If I had a dollar for every time Luce Clark has rudely interrupted me or my mother in the middle of a sentence I could buy him out." The girl laughed bitterly.

Presently they turned into a lane that led to the Malone ranch house which set far back from the road to get the advantage of a grove of native shade trees and clear spring water. The house was not larger than some other in the valley, but it was

better kept. The yard, both front and back, was full of shrubs and flowers.

They dismounted at the small yard gate and the girl led the way up a rock-lined path.

"Your good friend Clark doesn't approve of our yard," Helen remarked. "He says he'd rather see a calf on the lawn than a posy."

"With me it would depend on what kind of a calf it was," Trego laughed, and was answered by a hopeless shake of the head. He grinned.

Helen led Yates into the sitting room where Chauncey Malone sat writing at a desk.

"Oh, hello, Yates," the rancher greeted, getting to his feet to shake hands. "Glad to see you. Have a chair. Looks like Helen must have given you my message in person."

"Yes, she told me you wanted to see me, and was good enough to ride out with me," Yates said.

"And we fought all the way," Helen said. "Excuse me, will you? I want to change."

When the door closed behind the girl Malone motioned his visitor to a seat and resumed his own chair. "Have a cigar," he invited with a smile.

"Thanks. I'll just stick to Bull Durham," Yates refused.

"Just as you say," Malone said as he painstakingly lighted up a long black cigar and drew a few luxurious puffs. He was a tall, spare man with gray hair which somehow added to his impression of natural dignity. His delicate hands looked thin and frail. They were the hands of an aristocrat. Despite his thinness the man looked tough and wiry. He was as well tanned as Trego himself.

Chauncey Malone had begun life as a promising young lawyer. Then, five years after he had begun to practice he had been seized by an insidious disease which made it fatal for him to remain inside an office.

"Get out in the open and stay there," his doctors had told him and he had accepted their advice. Having a small independent fortune he had gone into the cattle business above Juniper. He was called "judge" by courtesy.

"You came from Juniper?" Malone asked. "Hear any news?"

"I picked up a scrap here and there," Trego replied. "Mostly from your daughter. I'm several weeks late getting in this spring on account of gathering a lot of new stuff. I seem to be behind the times. As near as I can gather the country has got enterprising all of a sudden."

"Right. They're meeting in Juniper tomorrow night to organize a new grazing association. A lot of new grazing land is available on account of the Warbonnet outfit selling out, so to manage it properly and keep out outside stuff they're going to get rid of the old riders and hire Charley Loose and his men to do the riding for everybody. They say, Yates, there won't be much room for you any more."

"Are you joining, Mr. Malone?" Trego asked courteously.

"It seems that I'd better," Malone answered with a dry smile. He shuffled some papers on his desk, and selecting one handed it to Trego. "I got this a couple of days ago. It seems I'm about the only dissenting voice, and dissenters are not popular."

Trego slowly unfolded the note and read. "Join the association, Malone, or else—"

CHAPTER IV

A STORMY MEETING

TREGO handed the note back to Malone. "What are you going to do about it?" he asked.

"I've already done it," Malone said. "I told the men who called on me about joining up to go to hell. I've been my own man for twenty years; I'm not going to start crawling on my belly now."

"You'd better think twice, Judge," Trego said soberly. "This is a lot more serious than I imagined. I never would have thought the stockmen here would fall for Charley Loose after the way he's treated them."

"It's human nature, I reckon, Yates. None of 'em has got all he wants. When they see a chance to get more they find ways and means to justify themselves and lull their conscience. They're being promised things. Take any rancher almost and he'll use all the credit he can get. He thinks if he just had more money he could buy more cows to eat more grass, to make more money to buy more cows. Here's a promise of more grass—and more money."

"How do you mean, Judge?"

"The ones who've talked to me all stress the point that if they can get more range

the banks will lend 'em money to buy the cattle to use it. Which leads me to the conclusion that there is a smarter man than Charley Loose back of it," Malone said.

"Oh-h! And who do you think this man would be?"

"I don't know. I showed this note to Sheriff Felch. No dice. He wanted to keep it as evidence. When I wouldn't let it go he just shook his shoulders and said he could do nothing. Count him as being on the other side. From all I can learn the promises of easy credit all seem to trace back to an enterprising real estate dealer named Jed Irvine."

"Irvine! You mean the fellow who dropped in here a couple of years ago and landed a job in Hamilton's store? Why, he's nothing but a tenderfoot."

"Yes, maybe. But he's got brains, that fellow. Money brains. He's went ahead fast. Had half a dozen jobs since Hamilton's, and now he has his own office, buys and sells land, and loans money on mortgages," Malone said.

"I see," Trego murmured. "Well, Judge, it looks to me like you'd chosen to back the wrong horse. You'd better, join the association."

"What are you going to do?" Malone asked bluntly.

"I ain't been invited to join. If I'd known sooner I wouldn't have taken on more stock. Gamblin' with other people's property don't appeal to me. But it's too late for me to back out now. I'm moving in on the Warbonnet range."

"Good. But it'll mean war. Don't worry about the ranchers here. They'll pay Loose to do their fighting an' glad of it. What kind of a crew have you got, outside of Bolivar and Reese?"

"Not much force. Just three Mormon ranch boys who know enough about cows to get by, but they're not fighting men."

"I can help some, I think. My two riders will stick and I mean to put on a third. Then there'll be four or five good men whom the ranchers will let drift as soon as the association is formed and Loose takes over," Malone said.

"I still say you'd better keep out of it," Trego said. "It looks to me like it was going to be between me and Loose." The puncher's face was gradually settling into a hard mask. He knew that he was vulnerable. Charley Loose knew it, too, and would go to any length to get him. Trego sensed that their feud could only be arbitrated with six-guns. He rose to go.

"Better stay all night, Yates," Malone invited cordially. "It's getting late."

"Thanks, Judge, but I've got a lot of riding to do before that meeting tomorrow night. I want to be there."

"So do I," Malone grinned. "But we can't stop it. Irvine has got them tied up with promises right now. And those who couldn't be won with promises have been won by threats. Their lives have been threatened if they don't sign."

"That fellow must be a lot smarter than I figgered he was."

"He is. And I don't like him," Malone said. "I'm going to tell you something in strict confidence. Helen would slay me if she knew I told you. A year or more ago Irvine tried to shine up to her, and she did go out with him a time or two as she has with most of the single men around here. People think she's a flirt, but she's not really. She's naturally friendly, but when a man don't measure up she drops him.

"Jed Irvine went dramatic on her. Seems he told her all about his ambitions and expected her to fall into his lap like fruit. When she didn't he got a bit excited. Told her that in three years time he'd be the biggest man in this county, and in position to ruin me financially. He bragged that when that time come she'd be glad to climb off her high horse and marry him.

"The hell of it is, Yates, the fellow has a way of making his predictions come true. He has certainly got me over a barrel. My principles won't let me join his association, and if I don't he can certainly break me."

"Are you sure he wouldn't break you if you did join?"

"That's just the point. I firmly believe that Loose and Irvine will break every man who joins their association. But there's not a thing I can do."

TREGO was more shaken than he cared to admit by what Malone had told him. Helen Malone was a big stake for any man to play for. Trego was beginning to be afraid of this fellow, Irvine. More afraid of him than he was of Charley Loose.

"Well, I'll see you at the meeting tomorrow night," he said.

It was midnight when Trego got back to his camp where the first of his summer herds were bedded. Another herd was in

process of formation in the lower valleys, and he had planned to send Steve back to boss it up the trail, but the critical situation that confronted him now necessitated a change. He needed both of his trusted lieutenants by his side, and badly.

He found Steve Bolivar awake and suffering from a badly inflamed arm. St. Cloud's knife had bitten deeper than they had thought. Fortunately it was the puncher's left arm that was hurt.

Yates explained matters as best he could to Steve and Reckless.

"If I'd knowed what was up I'd have shot Charley Loose yesterday while I had him danglin' on the end of my gun," Reckless said.

"We're in a tough spot, boys," Trego admitted. "I can't turn those cattle back now because the owners have no place to put them and it's too late to look for other range. If we go on we may get our heads shot off, and if we don't it'll break me making good the loss guarantee. It's a stiff fight, but what worries me most is dragging you boys into it."

"Don't mind that," Steve said. "You couldn't leave us out if you tried."

Trego wakened the other riders and despatched one of them back immediately to urge all haste with the other herd.

"Tell the boys with them to follow up the river as nearly as they can when they get out of the valleys, and somebody will meet them on the way. But the main thing is to *drive*. We've got to get our stuff on the old Warbonnet range before anybody else grabs it."

Almost before daylight Trego had his herd on the move. The Warbonnet outfit had always been a transient outfit; trailing out to the vast Snake River desert for the winter, and back up in the spring. The range they used had been high, and of little use until the middle of May. Thus far none of the local men had got their stock on it because their animals would do better on the lower, earlier range. Two hard days' drive, Trego figured, would place his cattle on the range.

They were tired and dirty riders at sundown that evening. Their charges *were* dogeys, and hard to drive. Moreover, they were inclined to back-track at every possible opportunity. In the lower country Trego had been able generally to hire a field to hold them in at night. But on the range they sometimes required night herding. Usually this only meant to guard the rear and prevent any animals from straying back. It required at least two men to hold them, and since Steve was suffering with his arm it was he who remained at the camp with the two new men, and Reckless who went to town with Trego.

They had to ride fast, and Trego realized that he would be late to the meeting anyway.

"You prowl around a bit and keep your ears open," Trego ordered his companion. "I'll go right over to the opera house where the meeting is being held."

"Aw, I like meetin's," Reckless said. "Let me go along."

"Nix. You'll not be needed. Nobody is going to start anything in the presence of fifty or sixty people."

As he approached the door of the opera house, before which groups of horses and a few buggies were clustered, a figure detached itself from the darkness and approached him. Trego halted, and his hand dropped to his gun.

"It's all right, Yates," the man said. "The judge told me to watch out here till you come."

Trego heaved a sigh of relief. He had recognized the man as Dewey Carson, one of Judge Malone's riders.

"Then the judge is inside?" he said.

"Yes. So is Charley Loose, but none of the rest of his gang are here."

"That's funny. I rather expected them."

Trego opened the door and gazed over the slumped figures in the uncomfortable seats in the dimly lighted emporium of pleasure. A man was speaking. It was Luce Clark.

"So as I sees it," he was going on, "there ain't a doubt of the wisdom of formin' this here association. With it we can buy more cattle to use our own range, an' not have to hand it over to foreigners who pay no taxes. Besides, as Charley Loose has told you, he can handle everything with half the men that we've been payin'."

The man suddenly saw Yates Trego, stared at him a moment and abruptly sat down. Immediately Charley Loose was on his feet.

"There's just one consideration if this association is formed and I'm hired to run your cattle," he said. "I must have absolute control over all the range in our terri-

tory. In return I promise you that no cattle belonging to men outside the association will be permitted to run there."

Judge Malone got to his feet.

"I've told you before," he said, "that I'll not join any association. I've always run my own outfit and I always will. My cattle are on the range and I warn everybody that I intend they shall stay there. The rest of you may be willing to stand for Charley Loose being dictator of the range, but I won't."

LOOSE had remained standing. "We'll see about that, Judge Malone," he said coldly.

Before Malone could answer back Jed Irvine was on his feet. He was rather well built, though as he grew older his frame would certainly take on fat to the point of obesity. Now he was almost chubby, and his thick red lips and rosy cheeks carried the impression of good nature until one looked at his small, acquisitive ice-blue eyes.

"I'm sorry my good friend Judge Malone takes the attitude he does," he began. "Our action certainly is not levelled at him, and I'm sure that he'll be willing to come in later when he sees the benefits of our organization. But I don't feel that we can afford to wait longer on account of him. I move you that the articles of the association which have previously been read be adopted."

"I second the motion," Andy Wentworth said.

"Mr. Chairman," Yates Trego called out. "May I ask a question?"

Had a pin dropped in the room it would have startled the crowd like a gun going off.

The chairman hesitated a moment, and glanced toward Irvine. "I reckon so," he said then. "What is it?"

"All I want to know before joining this association is whether or not Mr. Loose is going to be required to give bond to make good any cattle he may lose while in his care. It's customary, I know, because I'm in the same line myself, and I always give bond. If he's prepared to do this, or Mr. Irvine will do it for him then I'm not only ready but anxious to join."

A bombshell could not have startled the men more. A hub-bub of voices arose from every corner, and the chairman pounded in vain for order.

Judge Malone arose; his face wreathed in smiles.

"If Loose and Irvine will do that I'll join it, too."

Charley Loose leaped to the top of a table. "Loose will do nothin' of the damned kind," he bellowed. "I work for wages. I'll run your cattle, an' run 'em right; but I'm not takin' on any Jersey bulls, nor lettin' 'em run on my range."

Irvine, Judge Malone, half a dozen others were trying to get the floor. Yates Trego stood calm and undismayed at the other end of the hall. It necessitated looking around to see him. All of them there knew of the deadly enmity between him and Charley Loose. At any moment they expected the fire-works to start and they wanted to get out of the line of fire.

"Are you going to turn your stock over to a man who was caught red-handed in theft, and who won't give you the least guarantee—" Judge Malone shouted excitedly.

Charley Loose whirled, and a look of murderous rage crossed his face. Forgetful of his worst foe at the other end of the hall he slapped hand to gun. Malone's death seemed inevitable. But as Loose turned on the treacherous table he threw too much weight on one side and it tilted. He lost his balance and fell, wildly waving his arms just as he fired.

There were two shots at the same identical moment. One of them came from Yates Trego's gun. Loose's fall had caused both bullets to miss their mark, but for the moment Trego believed that he had shot Loose. Judge Malone had sunk from sight in the milling crowd, and Trego feared that his friend had been shot, too. He started forward.

As he fought his way down the crowded aisle he saw Loose on his feet. The man was bleeding from the mouth where he had struck some object as he fell, but there was panther rage in his eyes as he saw his foe coming. Heedless of the possibility that somebody between them might be shot he again raised his gun.

Trego found himself behind Luce Clark, and reached out with his left hand to sweep the man aside so that he could stand face to face with Loose, but he was too late. Something descended upon his head with terrific force, and the world turned black.

CHAPTER V

A MYSTERIOUS MISSIVE

YATES TREGO awakened to find a dirty ceiling over his head and a hard bunk beneath his back. At the first move an involuntary groan of pain escaped his lips. He shut his eyes and grabbed his head. But when he opened his eyes again he had better control of himself. He saw that the place was half lighted by a lamp in some other place, and when he turned on his side he saw that there were iron bars between him and the light—a smoky lantern that swung from the ceiling in the jail corridor.

Presently he yelled, but it was ten minutes before he got a response. Then a surly, curly-headed deputy sheriff shuffled back.

"What the hell is eatin' you?" the fellow demanded.

"I want out of here," Trego said.

"Oh, you do, hunh? Well, try an' git out." The man turned away.

"Hey, wait! Why am I in here? What happened last night?"

"You tried to kill Charley Loose and now you're in here on a charge of assault with a deadly weapon."

"That's nonsense. I fired to save Judge Malone. Loose drew first."

"Try provin' it."

"What happened to my head?"

"From the size of the bump I'd judge that somebody fell a tree on you. But all that happened was that Sheriff Felch bent a gun barrel over your dome."

"Felch, eh? What about Judge Malone? Was he hurt?"

"Not that I know of," the deputy growled. "Now go back to sleep an' keep quiet, or I'll turn the hose on you."

There was nothing for Trego to do but contain himself until morning. The same surly deputy, who answered to the name of Sam Vestry, brought his breakfast, but it was several hours later before Judge Malone appeared, following the sheriff. By that time Trego had got used to walking about without feeling that his head was going to swell up and burst with every step. He perceived at once from Malone's grave face that something was wrong.

"I'm going to get you out of here this afternoon—just as soon as court convenes," Malone said, after he had inquired how the prisoner felt. "They can't make a charge like this stick, even in Juniper. There are still enough decent men left to tell the truth."

"I suppose their organization went through," Trego said.

"Not yet," Malone replied. "You at least busted that up for the time being. You gave those boneheads something to think about, and now they want some kind of guarantee from Loose before turning him a-loose with everything they own."

"They'll sign all right," Sheriff Felch put in heavily.

"You hope," Malone retorted with withering scorn. "I've got bad news for you, Yates. Somebody—Loose's men no doubt—raided your trail herd last night and scattered 'em from hell to breakfast. Steve Bolivar seems to have disappeared, and Johnny Bartley was wounded."

Yates Trego went mad. "Let me out of here Felch, damn you," he roared. "I've got to find Steve. And when I do I'm goin' to git the bloody-minded curs who murdered him."

"Not in that frame of mind you don't git out," the sheriff snorted.

"Take it easy, Yates," Malone beseeched. "I can't get you out till this afternoon. In the meantime we're doing all that can be done. When Reckless learned that you were in jail and that I was doing all that could be done he started for camp. He got there right after the raid, and found Johnny Bartley, the wounded puncher, and Tim Bell, the one who had escaped. He sent Bartley into town and Bell to my ranch while he started to hunt for Bolivar. As soon as Bell arrived I sent my punchers, Dewey Carson and Joe Henderson back to help Reckless. They may have picked up a few more men. They'll soon find Bolivar and round up your herd."

"And I'll be setting here in this damned cell," Trego raved. "I've got to get out of here, Judge. I know Steve Bolivar. He'd never have run an inch. That boy has been killed!"

But despite his pleas it was three o'clock before the door of the cell was reluctantly opened by Sheriff Felch. Malone's legal ability had done that much. Malone and Helen were waiting for him with sober faces.

"Any news of Steve?" were his first words.

Helen choked back a sob, and he knew

that the boy who had been more friend than employee was dead.

"How was he killed?" he asked.

"I believe he was shot to death," Malone answered. "I hope so. He was hanging from a tree when they found him."

THE presence of Helen Malone could not restrain the terrible oath which rose to his lips. The girl didn't mind.

"You were right, Helen," he said slowly, as though each word was brought forth in pain. "I've been a fool. I'd have trusted these cowmen with my life. And the first time anybody offers them a few dollars they turn against me and cause the death of my best friend. Well, from here in I'll treat them like the vermin they are. And I'll have some dealings with the crew that hung Steve Bolivar."

"Be careful, Yates," the girl pleaded. "Don't ruin your whole life for revenge."

"It's not revenge," he said dully. "It's justice."

"About these rancher neighbors of mine," Malone said. "Don't be too hard on them. Some of them may be as bad as you think but I have found out that some of them didn't want to join. But they would have got the same thing that Steve Bolivar did if they hadn't promised. Loose and his gang have got the whole country terrorized. They always did have, you know.

"Through terror Jed Irvine is trying to make tools of all the men in the valley. He'll put them at the mercy of Charley Loose and his killers. If he can get away with it Irvine and Loose will break every man here except maybe two or three favorites. And Irvine has his own game to play. It's not because you stopped Loose from making that steal that they're after you, though that's enough to make Loose and his bunch hate you. You're only an incident. They can use you as a straw man to knock down."

"I hope they'll find me the toughest straw man they ever tried to monkey with," Trego said grimly.

"They will. We only want you to be careful," Helen pleaded.

"Don't worry. I'll be careful."

He promised them that he would soon join the men who were trying to gather up his stampeded herd. First, however, he went to see Johnny Bartley, the boy who had been wounded.

"We never had a chance," the puncher half sobbed. "Me an' Tim Bell was on guard duty. I was goin' off in about half an hour an' Steve was gonna take my place. All at once, a big flare of fire sprung up at the other end of the herd. They'd strung black powder across an' struck a match to it. The cattle were on their feet in a second an' gittin' away from there. Right after that five or six men busted out of the brush right close to me an' started shootin'.

"One shot got me in the laig, an' another under the arm-pit. I tried to shoot back, but my horse started to buck, an' then stampoodled. I heard Steve yell from the camp, but I never seen him. Time I got my horse stopped the cattle had gone on by. I could hear 'em runnin' an' hear that gang shootin' an' yellin', but there was nothin' I could do. After while I run across Tim. He'd got in the brush outa the way. We hunted for Steve but never found him. It was tough, Mr. Trego, but I guess me an' Tim kinda let you down."

"Nothin' of the sort; you done all you could do." Trego placed a hand upon the boy's shoulder. "You stay here till you get well. I'm paying all expenses."

He wished now that Steve might have been injured just a little more in his fight with Marco St. Cloud. He might still have been alive.

When he came down the stairs which opened directly out upon the sidewalk he almost collided with Jed Irvine. The man tried to draw back, but Trego's long arm reached out and caught him by the lapel. Luce Clark was with Irvine.

"What's the meaning of this—" Irvine demanded indignantly.

"Irvine, I've just learned that you are the dirty skunk behind the murder of as fine a boy as ever lived. You're lower than the ones who murdered Steve Bolivar, but you and Loose were smart enough to be in town while the rest of your gunmen did that lynching. Hangin' you, though, is a little matter that I'll take up myself."

"Are you threatening to hang me?" the man blustered.

"Exactly," Trego purred wickedly. He had worked his fingers onto the man's shirt collar, and now he took a twist that all but shut off the fellow's breathing. Irvine's eyes bugged out, and his face took on terror. He seized Trego's wrist with both hands trying to tear the punishing hand

loose, but Trego's arm was like a band of steel.

LUCE CLARK took a threatening step forward, but paused abruptly when he saw that Trego's other hand still rested upon the handle of his gun.

"Help! Sheriff! Sheriff! Stop this murder," he bawled at the top of his lungs.

Men started to run toward the tussle; then stopped abruptly when they recognized the contestants.

Suddenly Trego jerked his enemy toward him, then straightened his arm and flung Irvine backward into the dirt.

"I wouldn't murder you, you skunk," he said. "You've got a hanging coming, but you won't get it from me."

"You can't get away with this," Irvine panted from where he lay in the dirt, rubbing his throat. "I'll teach you to lay your hands on me. Just wait, my friend, just wait."

Abruptly Trego turned on his heel and approached his horse. He was sorry for his outburst of temper, yet somehow glad that he had briefly punished and frightened the man whom he believed had instigated the murder of Steve Bolivar.

Trego rode rapidly out of town and headed in the direction where his scattered herd would be. Being the kind of animals they were he didn't believe they would stampede very far. He expected to be able to find most of them gathered by his own men and the ones who had volunteered to help them.

He had hardly got out of the lanes before he began to encounter scattered bunches of cattle from his trail herd. Picking them up he soon had collected fifty or sixty head. Also he noticed that some of them were suffering bullet wounds, and he saw a few dead ones. His anger became cold and deadly.

He had just got into the foothills when a rider appeared suddenly on the top of a ridge half a mile away. It was impossible to recognize him at that distance, but the man waved his hat two or three times and then disappeared down the farther side of the ridge.

Trego stopped. It had all the earmarks of being a crude trick to draw him into a trap. Then on second thought it seemed queer that they would think him foolish enough to fall for a simple thing like that. Impulsively he wheeled his horse and galloped across below where the rider had disappeared, in hopes of again catching sight of him. Nor was he mistaken. His man was now three quarters of a mile away and riding at full speed back toward the lane which Trego had just quitted.

"That's darn funny," Trego muttered, and turned his horse straight up the ridge where he had first glimpsed the man. He kept a wary lookout for treachery on both sides, but he saw nothing unusual, and the top of the ridge certainly was not a good place for an ambush.

When he had reached the place where the man had first appeared he could see by the horse-tracks that the fellow must have been waiting in the vicinity for some few minutes. Then his eyes suddenly fell upon a piece of white paper impalled upon a broken twig of a sarvis bush. He hastily plucked it off and read the message. The writing on the soiled paper was plain, even though the handwriting had obviously been disguised.

He read:

> Trego: I didn't want to join that association, but I had to or get the same dose they're fixing for you. Lots of the others feel the same way, but unless Charley Loose and his gang are stopped we'll have to. Charley Loose and his men are camped in the mouth of a brush ravine that runs into Bear River about a mile below Emmigrant Butte. And there is to be a secret meeting of the cowmen with Irvine and Loose tonight in the old log schoolhouse on Badger Creek. I've got a family and I don't dare do anything, but I hope you can.
>
> A FRIEND.

"The poor, scared devil," Trego murmured commiseratingly.

He folded the paper carefully and stuck it in his pocket. He was strongly inclined to accept its authenticity; though again there was a possibility that it was another trick. Anyway, he meant to find out.

HE AGAIN picked up the little bunch of cattle, and just after sundown he came to a small meadow where the herd was again being gathered by five men. He gave his bunch a start and galloped to join the men. Besides Reckless and Tim Bell, and Malone's two men, Carson and Henderson, there was a lean, wrinkled, red-headed puncher named Wes McCrea, who had been a rider for Luce Clark.

For once there was no grin on Reckless' face.

"I see you got out of jail," he greeted.

"Yep, for the time being. Looks like you had most of the herd gathered."

"I'm sure we'll be able to pick up everything else above here as we go along—except the ones that was killed," Reckless answered.

"This is the rottenest deal I ever heard of," McCrea spoke up. "Ain't there any law you can appeal to?"

Trego shook his head. "Irvine and Loose would like nothing better than for us to try that. I'm grateful to you boys for your help, but the same thing may happen again, and I don't want you to get what happened to Steve Bolivar."

Try as he might he could not keep his emotion from showing in his voice when he spoke Steve's name. He saw Reckless surreptitiously wipe away a tear.

"We're with you in anything you start," Dewey Carson answered.

"That goes for me," McCrea answered with much emphasis. "I quit that skunk of a Clark because he went over to Loose. I'd have got fired anyway, but you've got my help, an' I'm not askin' any pay until you find out how you come out."

"Thanks, boys," Trego said feelingly. "I may need your help, but I don't want you staying here where you wouldn't stand any chance. I don't want to influence you in any way. If you want to ride with me tonight you'll risk your lives. I'll not think any less of any one of you who wants to be excused."

The answers they gave to that were quick and vehement.

"We'll follow through on anything you want to start," Wes McCrea answered. "We've all had to eat dirt from that Warbonnet outfit, but hangin' men who were only trying to do their work is going too far. What do we do?"

"The first thing we do is get some supper. By that time it'll be dark. Then we'll ride down to the Badger Creek schoolhouse," Trego answered.

CHAPTER VI

MURDER IN THE SCHOOLHOUSE

THE SIX riders swung along at a fast gallop, the rhythm of their horses' feet on the soft sod, and the faint creeking of saddle leather making the only sound to disturb the stillness of the night. As on the previous occasion when he had attended the stockmen's meeting Trego was late, but there was no help for it. This time, however, he was not going to announce his presence as soon as he arrived.

The Badger Creek schoolhouse sat in the center of an open space surrounded by quaking aspens. It was over a mile from any ranch, and had been located where it was as a sort of compromise between parents who had all wanted their hopefuls to attend school as close to home as possible. As a result it had been built close to none of them.

Its location was most favorable to Trego now. As he and his companions approached through the aspens they saw that the building was dimly lighted.

"They're here," Trego said with satisfaction. "You boys stay here. I'm going to reconnoiter a bit."

"Come back an' let us know before you start anything," Reckless insisted.

Trego gave the promise with a nod of the head, and dismounted. As he saw the horses tied around to the scattered aspens which had not been cut down to make room for the schoolhouse he became certain that he had not been tricked. There were too many horses for it merely to be the Loose outfit.

He could see at once that the building was dimly lighted by two lanterns. As he made his way carefully through the stumps he could hear the sound of angry discussion on the inside. He reached the back of the building and then tip-toed cautiously around to one of the broken side windows. Without even dirty glass to hamper his vision he could see quite clearly in spite of the poor light.

One lantern was on the teacher's dusty desk, and behind it sat Jed Irvine. The Juniper valley ranchers sat in the small, uncomfortable seats like sullen, recalcitrant pupils.

"The situation is just this, gentlemen," Irvine was saying coldly. "I have figured out a good proposition for all of you. One that will make us all money. Bankers are willing to lend money to anybody who has got good range. Well, here is the whole Warbonnet range. By joining this association it falls into your lap. Refuse and Yates Trego gets it. If he doesn't some other outside outfit will."

"And if we don't join it," a slender young rancher by the name of Lawrence Hoan

spoke up quaveringly, "you've intimated that we'll get the same thing Trego's outfit got. Is that right?"

"I said," Irvine smiled, "that you *might* get it. If you sign up Mr. Loose and his men will be able to protect you. If not, there's no telling what may happen. This is still a wild country."

Another cowman was on his feet. "I'm willin' to join an association if I have some say-so," he shouted. "But I'm not willin' to make it as a condition that we have to agree to give Charley Loose a three-year contract as manager. If he'll give us a guarantee or a bond that our interests will be protected like Yates Trego suggested I'll sign. But I was talkin' to Judge Malone today an' he pointed out that if we borrow all this money you've got to lend, Mr. Irvine, and you and Loose was in cahoots you could mighty easy ruin all of us. An' we know that Loose did try to euchre——"

It was as far as the man got. A gun crashed, and when Yates Trego straightened up to peer through the broken window pane he saw the rancher clutching desperately at the school desk in front of him, while a look of stark horror and amazed unbelief was fixed upon his face. Then his arm crumpled and he lurched forward upon his face; one arm dangling to the floor.

All this Yates Trego saw out of the corner of his eye while he searched the room for a sight of the man who had fired the shot. Then he saw Hash Middleton standing at one side of the room with a smoking six-gun in his hand. There was a cynical, sardonic expression upon the killer's face.

Trego's hand was upon his gun, but still he didn't draw. Something told him to wait. After all it was not his put in. Would the ranchers be intimidated, or would they revolt?

"That was murder," Lawrence Hoan shouted. "Why did Sheriff Felch make us take off our guns when we came in here, an' not you fellows? Do you intend to kill any of us that refuses to join your association?"

"That's just what I intend," answered the rasping voice of Charley Loose. "I'm through fooling with you saps. If you think I'm gonna let you go away from here sayin' that one of my men killed Lester yo're crazy. Yo're gonna sign them papers Irvine has, an' then every last one of you is goin' to swear that Lester was killed by a bullet fired from outside."

"What if we won't?" a man shouted.

"It'll just be too bad for all of you," Loose said furiously. "If you ain't got sense enough to take a good thing when it's offered to you I'll make you take it. If there's anybody here who won't sign let him stand up."

NOT a man moved. The ranchers had been tricked into giving up their guns. The sheriff was hand in glove with Loose. They, themselves, had voluntarily placed themselves in the man's power. Most of them were men with families. If he refused to sign each man could picture the grief of his wife and children when his dead body was found in some gulch with a bullet in the back. If they so much as protested they were certain to get what Lester had just got.

"Don't be damn fools," Loose went on. "Lester spoke out of turn. The man to charge with his murder is Yates Trego. We can all swear that the bullet came from that window."

Dramatically Loose waved his hand toward the very window through which Trego was watching. His amazement at seeing the face of his enemy there must have been great, but he was quick to take advantage of a favorable situation. Trego had ducked, but Loose's turn had been too swift. The eyes of the men inside had been faster than his legs.

For one breathless minute there was no sound. Then came the sound of Jed Irvine's shrill tones.

"Trego *is* out there. He *did* kill George Lester. I saw him."

Trego was tempted to leap back to the window to fire just one shot, but he knew that it would not do. Charley Loose's men were already tearing through the door, and the ranchers, without their weapons, were powerless to aid him, even if they had had the courage and the inclination, which he doubted.

"You fellows stay where you are," he heard Loose roar at the ranchers. "My men an' the sheriff will git Trego."

Trego ran; stooping low and taking a zigzag course as the first of Loose's outlaws appeared outside.

A gun roared and a bullet whizzed past him with a vicious, blood-chilling sound. The ones that followed he did not notice. There were too many of them.

"Come on, men, we can down him before

he gets to the brush," he heard somebody shout, and he recognized the voice of Sheriff Felch.

"Why, the dirty, double-dealin' swine," Trego gritted. He knew Felch favored Irvine, but he hadn't thought the man would openly countenance murder and show his hand as an ally of outlaws.

The ground was uneven, and the night fairly dark. This was all that saved Trego from being hit by the bullets which swarmed around him. With quick thought he had taken an angling course toward the aspens, instead of running directly toward the place he had left the others. That quickly proved to be good strategy, for out of the edge of the timber a fusillade of bullets stopped the pursuers in their tracks and made them drop flat on their bellies to avoid the slugs that whistled a threat of death over their heads. Had Trego ran straight toward his friends they would not have dared to fire.

Covered by the guns of the intrepid punchers Trego gained the timber, and then turned sharply toward the horses. He was soon behind his men.

"All right, boys, let's go," he called softly.

The punchers made the short run back, while Trego emptied his gun over their heads, and they were in the saddle before the opposition realized that they had left their position.

For a mile they held their horses to a dead run, and then paused when it became certain that there was no pursuit.

"I sure thought Charley Loose would chase us to hell an' back," Dewey Carson said. "How come?"

"They've got a better bet than that now," Trego said, and told them of the killing of Lester. "They accused me of firin' the shot, and even those who knew better will swear now that they saw me do it. With men like the sheriff and Irvine to dispute 'em it wouldn't do any good if they did say that Middleton fired the shot."

"Gawd, that's bad," Dewey said.

"What I'm interested in now is to keep you boys, out of it," Trego stated. "You Malone men go home, tell the judge what happened, and get him to swear that you were at the ranch all the time. McCrea, you go with 'em. Tim and Reckless, you go back to the herd, an' roll into your blankets. You'll have time to catch fresh horses and turn the ones you're on loose. Be sure you turn them where they can't be found. Their wet backs would be a give-away."

"That's right, Tim, you do that," Reckless said, his white, uneven teeth showing a wide grin in the moonlight. "But me; I'm stickin' with the boss."

"I'm sorta unemployed myself, an' I don't feel like spongin' off Judge Malone," McCrea said laconically. "Besides, they know there was more'n one feller shootin' back at 'em."

THE others offered to stick, but in the end Trego, Reckless, and McCrea rode on alone, while the others went their respective ways under protest. Before they left, however, Trego handed Dewey Carson the note he had found on the bush and instructed him to give it to Judge Malone.

"So Hash Middleton killed Lester, did he?" Wes McCrea said. "Lester was the whitest one of the whole bunch of ranchers, and he was no coward. He was a friend of mine. I hope Middleton turns out to be my meat." There was something in the man's tone that sounded forced, but Trego soon forgot it. After all McCrea had proved himself back there at the schoolhouse.

"And I want Marco St. Cloud," Reckless said in the grimest tone Trego had ever heard him use. "I've got a hunch it was St. Cloud who put the rope around Steve Bolivar's neck. All I want is a chance to hang my twine on him."

"Which leaves me Charley Loose," Trego grinned. "We'll take the rest as they come."

"Any plan, Yates?" Reckless queried.

"Not much. But the longer we delay now the less chance we'll have. Felch will be after me now with a posse, and if I'm caught I'll lay in jail even if they can't prove a murder on me. That is if I'm lucky enough to get to jail. I know where Loose's camp is. I have a notion to visit it."

"Fine," Reckless said. "Let's hit 'er up."

"It'll be a dangerous business," Trego warned. "I have an idea, too, that we might make a profitable little raid right in Juniper first."

"What do you mean?" the others chorused.

"Sooner or later Jed Irvine will be going to his room to hit the hay. He certainly won't be looking for us in town. I've a

notion to be there waiting for him."

They altered their course, and around midnight they entered the outskirts of Juniper. There was an old shed close under the brow of the hill which was used as a shelter from winter blizzards by the outlying ranchers when they visited town in the winter time. It saved them livery bills. This would now be deserted. The three punchers rode up to this place unmolested and led their horses inside.

"You'd better stay here, Reckless," Trego said. "One man can git around safer than two. Wes, do you suppose you could sorta mingle with the crowd when they begin to drop in without bein' noticed? They don't know you've been with me, and you might pick up something."

"You bet I can," the red-headed puncher said eagerly.

"Remember, Loose's camp is near Emmigrant Butte. If we don't get out of town together we'll try to meet at Bellvue's footbridge above there. It ought to be safe now that old Bellvue is dead."

Trego remained for a few minutes with Reckless after McCrea had taken his departure.

"What about this McCrea, Yates?" Reckless asked. "Are you shore he kin be trusted?"

"I think so. Loose caused him to lose his job, and Judge Malone recommended him to me. He certainly seems all right."

"I reckon he is," Reckless said. "He shore done some shootin' back there. I'm sure Malone's two men are all right, but don't lean too much on Timmy Bell. He means well, but no backbone."

"I had that figgered," Trego smiled. "But I'm figgerin' that the job of squarin' things for Steve Bolivar is rightly ours."

Trego skirted a line of houses and presently came to a rather large two-story house, which he had been informed was Jed Irvine's boarding house. It was easy to creep up from the rear in the shadows of various small out-buildings. Once his passing disturbed a rooster in a small chicken coop, and its premature matutinal salute gave him a momentary start. Then he gained the back of the house and crept along below the level of the windows until he had gained the corner of the front porch. There was a railing there, and a trellis upon which climbing roses, not yet in bloom, were supposed to climb. It afforded him fairly good shelter, and he flattened himself against it in the wall in the deepest shadows.

He had no more than got himself fixed when he heard a party of horsemen entering the town. Very soon there was considerable noise and excitement that seemed to have its focal point at the GAMBLERS REST.

Lights presently began to appear in various houses as the news spread. Once two men came together close enough for Trego to hear their voices.

"What's up?" one asked. "Why is everybody headin' toward the saloon at this time of night?"

"Ain't you heard? There was a meetin' o' the stockmen at the Badger Creek schoolhouse tonight, an' while it was goin' on Yates Trego, who assaulted Jed Irvine this mornin', took a shot through the winder at Irvine, but missed him an' killed George Lester. The sheriff is raisin' all the men he can to form a posse."

"Mebbe Trego was justified," the first speaker said. "Somebody raided his herd, an' hung one of his men. I reckon everybody knows who was responsible for that, even if there ain't no proof."

"I wouldn't be talkin' that way, neighbor," remonstrated the first man. "It ain't healthy. Trego is an outsider."

Some fifteen minutes after that Jed Irvine passed through the gate and came on up the path. Trego waited until the promoter's foot was raised to take the first step onto the porch. Then he spoke.

"Hold it, Irvine. Make a sound or a move and it will cost you your life."

For a minute Irvine was as motionless as a statue carved out of solid granite.

"Who are you?" he asked then in a thin, strained voice.

"Step around the corner here and find out," Trego commanded.

CHAPTER VII

A ONE-MAN JOB

AS THOUGH drawn by a magnet Jed Irvine removed his foot from the step and slowly came around to where Trego stood with hat pulled low over his eyes.

"What do you want of me?" the man asked hoarsely.

"Just keep on walking," Trego ordered. "You'll find out."

"Trego!" Irvine exclaimed. "If you think——"

"Shut up. I'd as soon shoot you as not." His gun was trained on the man, and Irvine kept walking.

When they reached the outbuildings Trego made the man stop and frisked him for weapons. Irvine carried a short, bulldog revolver in his coat pocket. Trego carelessly threw the weapon into the chicken-yard. And he also discovered a bulky document in the man's inside pocket which he was certain was the identical agreement the stockmen had been forced to sign that night. This he pocketed.

"Let's talk this over," Irvine begged.

"You've got nothing to offer me, Irvine," Trego refused. "Git goin'."

Whether Irvine had more courage than his captor suspected, or whether he merely gave way to blind panic Trego didn't know. But suddenly the fellow emitted a frantic bellow for help that must surely reach the ears of those who still were up in the town, and was likely to waken a lot of sleepers.

"Help! It's Trego!" he shouted.

He started a second yell, but the aggravated Trego suddenly slapped him alongside the cheek with the barrel of his six-shooter. It was not a hard blow, but the yell ended in a wail of pain as Irvine staggered back and grabbed his cheek. The blow had cut a wide gash.

Trego seized the man by the arm and shoved him forward.

"Another squeak out of you, Irvine, and it'll be the last noise you'll ever make. Run."

Stumbling and moaning, vainly trying to stop the flow of blood with his hand, the real estate man floundered on at an awkward run, propelled by the gun muzzle pressed hard against his ribs. Behind them an excited mob was forming.

By dodging among the buildings Trego was able to keep out of sight of the mob. He heard them reach the place where Irvine had yelled.

"It was right here, and it was Jed Irvine's voice," he heard a man shout.

"It's Trego all right, an' he's got Jed. Look around, men, an' keep yore eyes open."

Irvine staggered into the horse shed with his captor right behind him. Irvine fell face forward in the dirt and refused to move. The punchers had but two horses. The only way to take Irvine along was to load him forcibly onto one horse and one of them hold him on. Against his stubborn refusal to move it was quite impossible. Trego swore with vexation.

"If we can't take him we can shoot him," Reckless said. "It'll chalk off one of Steve's murderers."

"We should but we can't," Trego gritted. "Git a rope, while I gag him."

"With pleasure," Reckless said. "There's a dandy good beam right over his head."

Irvine sprang to his feet with alacrity. "No, no," he cried. "Don't hang me. I'll go with you."

"I don't want you now," Trego said. His plans had been disorganized by the pursuit. He had hoped to get out of town with Irvine, and use the man as a decoy for the outlaws he wanted to reach. But with a pursuit on their hands the plan would not work. Neither did he want the enemy to think that there was anybody with him.

Reckless dropped a noose over Irvine's shoulders and drew the man's arm tight to his sides, while Trego ripped the bandanna from his neck and gagged the man securely. They had to work fast, for they could hear the pursuit rapidly drawing nearer.

They tumbled Irvine into the manger, half-hitched his arms, fastened them securely to the manger poles; then ran the rope down to his feet, half-hitched them together and then tied them to the manger. The fellow lay utterly silent and helpless, and they had tied him up in the time they would have taken to hog-tie a steer.

"They come this way. They must be in that old horse shed. Surround it," they suddenly heard Sheriff Felch's booming voice.

"Do we shoot our way out?" Reckless asked, still grinning.

"Not unless we have to. Here." He jerked Reckless' big, somewhat floppy old hat from his head and replaced it with Irvine's natty lid. "Keep your head down."

They swung onto their horses in the low shed, and had to stoop until they got outside.

"There they come, men! Watch out," a voice yelled.

"Hold everything, Sheriff," Yates Trego called out loudly. "You come any closer, or fire a shot and it'll cost Irvine here his life. Don't try followin' me either."

Reckless had ridden between Trego and the mob, and they didn't doubt that it was Irvine. The sheriff swore loudly, but no-

body dared shoot. The two punchers turned their horses, and rode away; not too rapidly, for fear of arousing suspicion.

"Horses, men, an' we'll run that damned Trego to death," the sheriff bawled. "I won't let him git away with that."

Looking back Trego and Reckless were sure that the mob had all turned back without investigating the horse shed. They looked at each other and grinned. Then they poured the spurs to their mounts and managed to get out of town far enough in advance of the posse to be temporarily safe.

"Well, I guess that hombre who left the note figgered he'd be doin' me a good turn, but the way it turned out he couldn't have served Irvine better if he'd tried," Trego stated.

"We still know where Loose's outfit is camped," Reckless said with a touch of grimness so unusual that Trego glanced at him with surprise.

"Yes," Trego murmured. "Two against eleven. Maybe three if McCrea joins us. But they'll be after me on a murder charge after this and God knows what else. If I'm goin' to do anything to avenge Steve now I've got to work fast."

"We can pour a hell of a lot of lead into 'em just about dawn before they can do much," Reckless said hopefully.

TREGO looked at the grinning young puncher with genuine affection. He wanted to avenge Steve Bolivar—but not at the cost of Reckless' life. And there was only one way to stop that impetuous young puncher. That was by subterfuge and deceit.

"Listen, Reckless," he said earnestly, "the main thing is to stop Charley Loose and his murderers before they can do any more harm. If we can get rid of Loose it'll be like pullin' the chunk out from under Jed Irvine. And with Loose and one or two more of those killers out of the way there'll be a good chance that somebody who knows the truth about Lester's murder will weaken. But we've got to be sure there's no slip-up. We need more than two men."

"Meanin' which?" Reckless queried unenthusiastically.

"Meanin' that Judge Malone and his men will be glad to help us. I think Tim Bell will help some, too. With that many we can really accomplish something an' not just throw our lives away. We'll be harder to follow anyway if we split. I want you to circle back to Malone's an' tell him how it stands. Tomorrow night we'll all meet at Bellvue's bridge. I'll ride past camp an' give the word to Tim Bell."

"An' then what?" Reckless demanded.

"I'll look the ground over and decide on a plan of attack," Trego answered promptly. "We won't take any more chances than we have to. And here's another paper to give Judge Malone." He passed over the document he had taken from Jed Irvine. It might serve as evidence."

Nevertheless, it required considerable argument to get the puncher to agree to leave him. Yet it seemed such obviously good sense to get what help was available that Reckless was at last convinced. Presently, he turned up a brushy gulch to wait for the pursuing posse to sweep by, and then he rode back toward Malone's ranch.

Trego kept on going, urging his hard-breathing mount to a fast pace, and choosing his course with canny skill to throw off the pursuit; but he had no intention of notifying Tim Bell; nor of waiting for Reckless and Malone's men before striking at his foes.

As he saw it it was a one-man job—and he was the man. He had been too badly pained by Steve Bolivar's death to want anybody else to suffer a similar fate. It was primarily his fight. He sensed that without Charley Loose the ring which Irvine had formed would fall to pieces. And Loose was the man whom he blamed chiefly for the murder of poor Steve.

Reckless' idea to attack the outlaw camp at dawn, he believed was a good one; but he intended to make the attack single-handed—and twenty-four hours earlier than he had told Reckless.

Once assured that he had shaken off the posse he turned his tired mount toward Emmigrant Butte.

BACK IN JUNIPER Jed Irvine had struggled in vain to release his hands or to shift the gag from his mouth so that he could call for help, but without avail. Trego and Reckless had done their job well. Nobody came near the old horse shed, and he heard the posse gallop out of town on what they imagined was an effort to rescue him.

He had been there perhaps an hour, and was getting a real fright lest he might be left there to die, when he heard footsteps.

A moment later he saw the blink of a lighted cigarette. Somebody was coming, but so furtively that cold fear shot through Irvine's heart.

Suppose, he thought, Yates Trego had thrown the posse off his trail and had circled back to murder him!

The unknown entered the shed, paused a moment; then lighted a match and looked curiously around. Just before the match died out his eyes rested upon Irvine, and he chuckled aloud.

"Oh! So there you are? I kinda thought I'd find you here, when I saw there were only two men leave." He waited a minute or so, chuckling, before he loosened the gag from Irvine's mouth and lighted another match. But he seemed in no hurry to liberate the man in the manger.

"Turn me loose, McCrea," Irvine pleaded. "I'm a friend of yours."

"Yeh? Yore damned organization throwed me out of a job, didn't it? I didn't see you fallin' over yourself gittin' me a new one."

"I can remedy that. I'm badly hurt, McCrea. Look at the blood. Get me to a doctor and I'll see that Loose gives you a job."

"I don't want no job with Loose," the red-headed, wrinkled-faced puncher said. "There's only one way you can interest me."

"What is that? Hurry, man, I may be dying. Trego struck me over the head with his gun."

"Then you ain't dyin', or you wouldn't be able to talk," McCrea said.

"What do you want?" Irvine cried angrily.

"Keep yore shirt on, an' don't raise yore voice," the other admonished. "I want money. A lot of it. If I don't git it I'll join Trego an' you can lay here an' rot for all I care. I can put this gag back you know."

"How much?"

"I reckon I could use about five thousand dollars."

"You're crazy. Somebody is sure to find me in the morning. I can stand a lot of discomfort for that much money."

"But they think Trego has got you," McCrea pointed out. "If yo're ever found it'll be an accident."

"Children come here to play every day," Irvine said with a confidence he didn't really feel. "I'll give you a hundred dollars, no more."

"Fella, listen: This is the first time I ever sold anybody out in my life. If I wasn't sure Trego was goin' to lose anyway I wouldn't do it now. But you know yourself that if anything was to happen to Charley Loose it would crimp your plans. Would it interest you to know that Yates Trego knows where Loose is camped, and that he means to dry-gulch Loose the first chance he gets?"

"He can't know. Loose has been keeping his camping place a secret."

"He's camped in the mouth of the first ravine south of Emmigrant Butte on Bear River."

"My God, man it'll be murder if you don't let me go," Irvine cried.

"I won't shed a tear if Trego gits Loose. It'll be too late for you to do anything about it anyway, maybe. But I can tell you where Trego will be hidin' out. Do I get the five thousand?"

Irvine was silent for some time. "One thousand," he said at length.

"Five thousand."

"I haven't got it, man," Irvine protested.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Irvine," McCrea offered. "Your credit is always good at the GAMBLERS REST. Barstow always keeps a lot of money in his big safe there. If you'll go there and ask him for a loan of five thousand he'll let you have it if he's got it. If he ain't got that much I'll take whatever happens to be in his safe. Is it a bargain, or do I leave you here to enjoy your gag again until I can git out of town?"

"It's a deal," Irvine said reluctantly. "Cut these ropes."

CHAPTER VIII

A MAD ESCAPADE

IT STILL lacked an hour of dawn when Yates Trego left his horse tied to a tree and started to pick his way up the trail which he believed would lead to the outlaw camp.

Emmigrant Butte, a mighty, isolated hill which rose like a gigantic cathedral above the surrounding plain had in older days served as a landmark for weary immigrant trails on the famous Lander cut-off. Its majestic front rose hundreds of feet straight up from the rushing river that bathed its foot. Its two sides were scarcely less pre-

cipitous, but the deep, bushy gulch he was following headed against the south side of the monster butte.

It was an admirable hiding place, but the outlaws had erred in trusting too many people with knowledge of it.

Trego had no definite plans; preferring to be guided by circumstances as they arose. Since he would have to use strategy rather than violence against such overwhelming odds he carried no weapon save his six-shooter. He hoped that he wouldn't have to shoot anybody without warning. True, the Warbonnet crew had not given any warning when they murdered Steve Bolivar, but he hated to fight that way.

It seemed to grow darker just before dawn. He fought his way through the brush with difficulty, and was constantly being alarmed by the sticks which snapped beneath his feet.

It was the inquiring nicker of a horse which warned him that the camp was near. A few minutes later he reached the edge of a small clearing just below a small stream of water gushing out from a sleek black rock. He could make out the outlines of three tents, two large and one small one, and then he saw two night horses tied up not far below.

The outlaws could not have been in bed more than a couple of hours, for at least most of them had been at the Badger Creek schoolhouse. They had not, however, been in Juniper. They would be sleepy, and in all probability would sleep late.

Trego was no man to want to commit suicide; yet he realized that he was taking desperate chances with his life by making this lone-handed raid. But if it was necessary to die in order to relieve the world of Charley Loose he was ready to make the sacrifice. But he wanted to make the most of his opportunities.

Suddenly he saw his opportunity to use strategy, and without strategy he would be committing suicide.

The men had kept up two night horses, and turned the remainder of their animals into the cavvy. Probably one of the two kept up was for emergency use anyway. The point was that the horses had been tied close to a huge cluster of sarvis bushes, so that they couldn't circle around the trees to which they were tied and get wound up. It was easy for Trego to conceal himself behind those bushes.

But first he carefully untied the night horses without letting the animals know they were loose. By the time he had finished dawn was breaking rapidly as it always did in that mountain country. Soon somebody was stirring inside the tents. A few minutes later a sleepy-eyed outlaw stumbled out of one of the tents, and came toward the night horses. It was the horse wrangler. Trego drew his gun and waited.

The puncher shuffled over and slapped one of the horses on the rump, and said gruffly, "Git over."

When the horse moved the fellow suddenly saw Trego and his six-gun just beyond. He blinked.

"What the——"

"Don't move," Yates Trego uttered in a low, deadly tone that must have frozen the fellow's blood. Every movement now was fraught with death, and the tension in Trego's brain was communicated to the man he had held up. The fellow remained motionless, sensing that death itself was at his shoulder.

Slowly Trego stepped out from behind the bush. Keeping the man covered with one hand he removed the six-gun from the fellow's holster and thrust it under the waist-band of his own overalls. Then, slashing a string of a saddle, he tied the fellow's hands behind his back, and motioned him to a point behind the brush where he was concealed from the tents, but where Trego could still keep an eye upon him.

"Whether you keep on living depends on how you act from now on," Trego said matter of factly. "A wrong move will bring hell on your ears, but Charley Loose is the man I want."

"What can I do?" the outlaw shrugged.

Trego told him.

With a voice that quivered from strain and fright the puncher, whose name was Ollie Drew, called out:

"Charley! Oh, Charley. Come out here a minute."

"What the hell is wrong?" demanded an irritated voice from the smallest tent.

"Something here that looks queer. I want you to look at it."

"Well, what is it?" Loose demand in still more irritation.

"I can't bring it to you. You'll have to come out here. It'll only take a minute," Drew said, dutifully repeating each sentence as Yates Trego dictated it in a whisper.

"Go see what he wants, Hash," then came Loose's voice.

Drew looked at Trego inquiringly, and the puncher bit his lip in vexation. Hash Middleton wasn't the man he wanted, but he couldn't insist upon Loose coming instead of sending his trusted lieutenant. Trego stepped back to the end of the bush and waited. His gun was always where he could cover Ollie Drew.

The flap of the tent was thrown back and Hash Middleton, still logy from sleep, staggered out. The men all slept in their shirts according to usual range custom. Middleton had drawn on his boots to protect his feet, and buckled his gun belt around his waist, but had neglected to put on his pants. He expected to go back to bed.

"What the hell do you think you've found?" he grumbled as he approached the horses. "Gawd, if I was as timid as you I'd hire a nursemaid. Where the hell are you——"

Yates Trego didn't voice a challenge now. He stepped out in full view of Middleton, and the business end of his revolver was directed straight toward the outlaw's gizzard.

Middleton's jaw dropped; he made a spasmodic move toward his gun, then jerked his hands suddenly into the air as he saw Trego's eyes start to narrow.

"You'll never be closer to death than you are right now till they put the rope around your neck, Middleton," Trego said softly. "Unbuckle that gun belt and keep your eyes on the ground. I want Loose, but if I can't git him I'll take you."

SLOWLY the gun was unfastened and dropped to the ground. Middleton kicked it toward Trego when the latter commanded him to do so. Trego gave it another kick that landed it behind a bush. Then he used another saddle-string to tie Middleton's hands, and made him move over beside Drew.

Anything might happen now. If anybody got suspicious and stuck their head out of a tent there would be hell to pay. The slightest mistake would be fatal. In Hash Middleton's eyes, red with the fury of a goaded bull, Trego read a hatred that waited only for the first possible break to become deadly.

"You tell Loose that he'd better come out here and have a look himself," Trego whispered. "Make your talk pretty because if he comes a-shootin' I'll drop you and Drew and make my git-away on one of these horses."

Hash Middleton gulped twice before he could call out. For the moment he was as much concerned in getting Loose out there as was Trego. His life depended upon it. He could read that in Yates Trego's merciless face. He was a cold-blooded killer, and he knew that Trego knew it, and would act accordingly if he were pressed.

"Oh, Charley: Better come out here an' have a look at this yourself."

The answer was a fluent stream of profanity issuing from inside the small tent.

"What the hell is eatin' you fellers?" the Warbonnet foreman ended. "What is it?"

Trego's hope was to get Loose out without arousing the others. But it was difficult. If it sounded important they would all come. If it was trivial Loose wouldn't budge.

"Say there's a mark on the trees that wasn't here last night," he dictated tersely.

"There's something on a tree here that looks funny," Middleton called dutifully. "I don't think it was here last night."

"Oh, my Gawd," Loose answered in a disgruntled tone, but a couple or three minutes later he came out of the tent. He had drawn on his pants as well as his boots, but perhaps for one of the few times in his life he had neglected to bring his gun.

"What kind of a mark on a tree is it, an' who cares?" the man grumbled as he advanced. "Prob'ly some animal——"

"Keep right on talkin' Loose, but be careful what you say," Yates Trego commanded.

Loose gave a spasmodic start. His pale blue eyes bulged and then narrowed with a gleam of hate. He halted for just a second, and then came on, grumbling unintelligibly as he walked until he stood by Middleton's side.

"What kind of a doin's is this?" he demanded then. "You can't git away with this, Trego. If you fire a shot at me my men will wipe you out."

"Maybe. Git into that saddle, Middleton, and no monkey business. Loose, you git on behind him. Drew, you walk on down the trail an' keep ahead of us. And remember: No matter what happens I'll get one of you two for the murder of Steve Bolivar, and the other for killin' George Lester."

With considerable difficulty because of

his tied hands—Hash Middleton got into the saddle on one of the night horses, and tense as the situation was Trego had an impulse to laugh at the ludicrous picture the man made with his shirt-tail flapping in the breeze and his white drawers drawn tightly over his skinny legs down to his boot-tops.

But another man had viewed the spectacle with less amusement. Marco St. Cloud, made curious by what was going on, stuck his head out of another tent, and at sight of Middleton on a horse in his strange attire had suspected something wrong. He suddenly let out a yell that brought the remainder of the outlaw crew tumbling out of their blankets. In a flash the fellow saw what was wrong.

Trego had stepped to the side of the other horse. His only chance to get away alive now, he realized, was to get on that horse. He wasn't half a second vaulting into the saddle, but that was long enough for Charley Loose to make a desperate lunge into the brush. Trego fired, but a sudden plunge of his horse made him miss. The same instant a bullet from St. Cloud's gun crackled the air within an inch of his ear.

With his left hand Trego brought the iron-jawed night horse sharply about. The animal reared as a second shot from St. Cloud tore through the overalls on Trego's right leg. The small killer with the whitish eyes was yelling lustily for the others as he fired, and this perhaps was spoiling his aim.

THEN, even before his mount's front legs struck the ground again Trego fired. He saw St. Cloud's hands go up, and a small red smear appeared on the front of the fellow's shirt, just over the heart, as his knees crumpled from under him.

"One," Trego said explosively.

But now the remainder of the crew were pouring out of their tents with their guns in hand. Trego whirled his horse, and brought the ends of his reins down across the rump of the horse Hash Middleton was on, starting the animal down the trail ahead of him.

"Keep going, Middleton, damn you," he ordered.

A whole swarm of bullets seemed to have been turned loose behind him, but the brush and the trees afforded a fair screen, and none of them found a mark. Ollie Drew leaped aside just in time to avoid being run down, and then fell flat to escape the reckless lead being scattered around. Charley Loose was howling at his men to aim low, but none of them seemed to hear. The ravine fell away steeply, and their shots were persistently going just over the fugitive's head.

Hash Middleton was ahead of Trego in the trail, and for the moment he had no more desire to slow down in that hail of bullets than his captor had.

The firing soon ceased as the outlaws lost all sight of them in the brush, but not until they were back to where he had left his horse did Trego begin to breathe easy. It had been a close call. He had failed in his major object to capture Charley Loose, but he at least had Hash Middleton. And he had permanently checked the career of perhaps the most bloodthirsty killer of the gang. Leading his own horse behind they hurried on.

"Hey, where you takin' me?" Middleton demanded.

"If there was just a county fair runnin' I'd exhibit you as a specimen of wild bull," Trego replied. "Just keep on ridin' where I tell you, an' ask no questions."

"But I ain't got no pants," the outlaw wailed.

"That's your hard luck. But you won't be needin' pants long. You fellows set a precedent for us when you hanged Steve Bolivar. Now we can hang you for murderin' George Lester. You know I was an eye-witness to that. I saw you shoot him down in cold blood."

The killer was silent. His face was ashen with fear, but he sensed the futility of denial. And the implacable look on Trego's face implied that it would be useless to beg for mercy.

It was only a matter of some five miles to the hiding place which Trego had chosen. It was a foot bridge across a narrow place in the river. It was never used now, since the half-crazy prospector who had built it was dead, and his diggings deserted. It was a rickety affair at best, and never would have sustained the weight of a horse. Just above the bridge was a narrow strip of meadow some two or three rods wide between the bluff and the water, but it was concealed from the bridge by a fringe of tall thick brush. Few besides Trego knew that there was a place just between the brush and the bluff that a horse could squeeze through. It was here

he had told Reckless and McCrea he would meet them.

On that hard-packed earth he knew that the barefooted horses could never be tracked, but to make sure he rode on past, and made a half circle back above the top of the bluff over solid rock.

The outlaws were afoot, and they would remain so until some of them walked a long distance to get a horse to run in their cavvy.

His failure to capture Charley Loose was discouraging. He had hoped to hold the man prisoner long enough to make Irvine and the others believe that Loose was dead or had deserted them. He had believed that with the outlaw leader out of the way that Judge Malone could contrive to bust Irvine's association wide open. If that happened some of the ranchers would tell the truth about the murder of George Lester. That would clear Trego himself of the murder charge, and then he could come forth with Loose and accuse the man of the murder of Steve Bolivar. He had believed, too, that this would frighten Jed Irvine into repudiating Loose, and insure Loose hanging for some of the crimes he had committed.

The plan had been good, but it had been too much for one man to accomplish single-handed. Now his only hole card was Hash Middleton, and different tactics would have to be used. But if Middleton could be frightened into confessing his crimes in order to save his neck the required ends might be obtained just as quickly.

Trego planed to hold the fellow prisoner at the Bellevue bridge until Reckless and the Malone men arrived that night. Then there would be an impromptu murder trial which would certainly be an ordeal for the pantsless Middleton.

There was a steep rocky slope to be got down before they reached the foot bridge. When they reached the end of the bridge they stopped and looked down at the roaring torrent some fifteen feet below.

"Yeh, there's plenty of room there to hang a man," Trego soliloquized. "If the boys have got here it won't be long now. But they may not arrive till night, and I don't want to deprive Reckless of the fun of seein' the dirty cur who killed his buddy swing."

"Trego, you can't do that!" Middleton at last broke his silence. "Give me a break. All you need is a witness to swear that Bolivar was killed on Loose an' Irvine's orders. Let me live and I'll swear it for you. Honest to God I will."

"We'll see what Judge Malone and the boys think. Personally, I favor hanging," Trego said grimly.

MIDDLETON continued to talk. He admitted unhesitatingly that the plan was to first organize the Juniper ranchers into an association over which Charley Loose and Irvine would have complete control, destroy Trego in revenge for what he had done to the Warbonnet crew the years before, and then despoil the ranchers themselves.

"Just whose bright idea was it in the first place?" Trego asked.

"It was Irvine's. He wanted a chance to put the screws on Judge Malone because Malone's daughter had turned him down. He's crazy about her, an' he figgered he could git her if he could break her dad. Loose wanted to git back at you. At first our idee was for Charley to pick a gun fight an' bump you off. Then we figgered to cash in on yore dogeys. But Irvine figgered out this bigger scheme. Sheriff Felch was his uncle, an' it looked safe." He went into still further details.

"What I still can't see," Trego remarked, "is how you could have scared all those ranchers into joinin' against their will."

"In the first place they all kinda hankered to join because Irvine promised 'em big money for doin' it. If it hadn't been for Malone an' you there wouldn't have been no trouble a-tall. When they begin to balk we just put the fear o' Gawd into 'em. Havin' the sheriff on our side helped. They knowed Loose had the nerve to bump 'em off, an' they knowed nothin' would be done about it."

"Well, if you stick to that story yore chances for livin' may be fairly bright after all," Trego admitted. But he could not forget the cold-blooded way he had seen the fellow shoot down George Lester. Middleton did not deserve to live, but it was more important to bring the two leaders to justice. With Middleton's confession Trego believed it would be easy.

But a man had seen them coming from Emmigrant Butte. He had gotten into an aspen drogue in time to avoid being seen by Trego, and he had watched them pass with bitter, hate-filled eyes. With the sly cunning of a coyote he had watched them

turn down to Bellevue's bridge. When satisfied that they were going to stop there he had turned and ridden madly on to the outlaws' camp. That man was Jed Irvine.

Needless to say he had been welcomed.

CHAPTER IX
THE LONG CHANCE

ONCE behind the thick brush and out of sight from the bridge Trego and his prisoner dismounted. Middleton was rather a pitiful sight. His woolen drawers had seemed to catch every branch and thorn along the way, and some of them had torn the skin. Neither was his raiment adapted for horseback riding, and he got out of the saddle breathing lurid oaths. He got no comfort from his captors.

"Looks like I'd better tie you up better, Middleton," Trego said. " 'Specially your head. You're liable to bite yourself in the neck."

"Git me some pants," the fellow bleated. "These damn' skeeters are eatin' me alive. They bite right through this underwear."

"It's yore hard luck, Middleton. You lost all claim on me when you hung Steve Bolivar."

"I didn't have nothin' to do with that, honest I didn't," the fellow insisted. "Charley Loose did send us to raid your herd with orders to scatter 'em from hell to breakfast an' shoot when we could. We knew the sheriff wouldn't do anything about it. He didn't aim to kill nobody. Loose wanted to make you come after him so he could plead self-defense when he downed you. It was Marco St. Cloud who started that. First he shot one of the men on guard. Then Bolivar rode out a-shootin' an' St. Cloud shot him. When he slumped over St. Cloud hung his rope on him. I went on an' I didn't know he'd been strung up."

"Pretty poor defense," Trego commented grimly. "I've paid St. Cloud, but I want the rest of you. The only reason I'd make an exception of you is that I want Loose and Irvine worse."

Trego mercifully wrapped the man's legs in a saddle blanket and then tied him securely to two small saplings in the shade.

There was nothing to do now except wait for the arrival of Reckless with help. Hash Middleton's confession had to be got out of him where pressure could be brought to bear. Once in jail the fellow would repudiate it instantly.

The day was warm, and he had had a hard fight. It would be a wait of several hours, and he was growing desperately sleepy. He examined Middleton's bonds again, made certain that the fellow could not possibly free himself; then he went a few yards distant, found a shady place and stretched out upon the other saddle blanket. He was sound asleep in ten minutes.

Out of that uneasy, feverish sleep of high noon he was aroused by a voice directly above him.

"All right, Trego," it said. "You can wake up now."

His body jerked. He blinked, but his eyes were almost stuck shut, and for half a minute everything was a blur. His mind wasn't clear. He supposed Reckless and Judge Malone had arrived—only they never called him 'Trego.' Maybe it was Wes McCrea.

Suddenly his senses flowed back like a released flow of water. His eyes flew open, and he recognized Charley Loose standing over him. Spasmodically he reached for his gun, but his hand didn't respond to the command of his brain. Instead, he suffered excruciating pain. Glancing down he saw Loose's booted foot grinding down upon the back of his hand. A gun in the outlaw's hand pointed straight into his face.

"Calm down, Trego, calm down," the Warbonnet boss said sardonically. "Gittin' all excited ain't gonna do you no good."

Somebody—it proved to be Ollie Drew—reached down and removed his gun from the holster. The one he had taken from Drew he had laid upon the ground and it had already been taken. Trego was suffering agony from the boot-heel that was planted upon his hand, but he wouldn't voice a protest. Loose was shifting his weight just enough to give a revolving movement that was paralyzing in its effect. It was a couple of minutes before the fellow desisted, and by that time Trego was unable to use his hand. Loose holstered his gun.

"Bein' sociable critters we thought we'd return the call you made on us this mornin'," Loose said. "We'll try an' be as hospitable to you as you was to Hash. Cut that cuss loose there, somebody."

"Did anybody bring my pants?" Middleton demanded as he was released.

"Nope, plumb forgot about you leavin' in such a hurry," Loose said. "Yo're lucky to have a shirt."

"Then, by Gawd, I'll have Trego's pants," Middleton said furiously.

"You'd have been interested in the little story Hash told me when he thought I was goin' to have him hung," Trego remarked.

"So he squawked, did he?" Loose gritted. "I figgered he would. Never mind the pants, Middleton. If you've spilled the beans you won't need no pants."

"He's lying! I didn't say a word. Honest to Gawd I didn't," the gunman protested.

"Except how your whole racket was worked. He even told me that the sheriff was Irvine's uncle, and told me how you expected to break all these ranchers by shippin' their cattle out after the sheriff had certified to crooked brands. Said your outfit was to git the cattle, an' Irvine and Felch the ranches and the range."

"By Gawd, lemme at him," Hash Middleton mouthed. "I'll cut his damn' lyin' tongue——"

He made a rampse at the prostrate puncher but Charley Loose met him with a straight-arm that thrust him back.

"Don't growl, you dirty, yaller cur—it don't fool nobody," Loose said vengefully. "You got scared an' talked yore head off. Well, even if it won't do any hurt now I won't have that kind of a man around me. Take what you got comin'."

Middleton stopped and a look of horror transfixed his face. He knew the caliber of the man with whom he dealt. Charley Loose was utterly cold and implacable. Even as Jed Irvine voiced a strangled cry of protest Loose's hand dropped to his hip and his gun came out of holster like a piece of well-oiled machinery. The precision of that draw, aside from the horror of what it meant, was a beautiful thing to watch. Twice the hammer fell, and the two slugs buried themselves within an inch of each other in Middleton's body.

"Charley, you think you'd ought to have ——" the white-faced Irvine muttered feebly.

"What're you croakin' for?" Loose interrupted savagely. "You wasn't squeamish about startin' this fight. He squawked, didn't he? An' another thing: sooner or later some of them fool cowmen would squawk about him killin' Lester. This is an out. We don't need the Lester killin' to pin anything on Trego now, because we've got Trego. We'll admit now openly that Middleton killed Lester. An' him an' St. Cloud can take the blame for the Bolivar killin'."

THE Warbonnet foreman turned to Yates Trego.

"If it'll make you feel any better, Trego, they was solely responsible for Bolivar bein' killed the way he was. I give 'em orders to raid your herd, but I didn't tell 'em to kill anybody. They took that on themselves. I intended to kill you an' them two punchers some day, but not that night."

"I still hold you responsible," Trego said coolly.

"Anyway, I'm glad I'm free of Middleton an' St. Cloud. They'd got to the point where they thought I couldn't do without 'em an' they wanted to give the orders."

"I didn't plan these murders," Jed Irvine said weakly. "The killing of both Bolivar and Lester was a mistake. I'm mighty glad that it can now be explained. We can say that Trego and Middleton killed each other."

"You stick to the money end," Loose sneered. "Trego is goin' to disappear. A body that falls into this river here would never be recognizable even if it was ever pulled out. That's where Trego is goin'."

Trego made no sign that he was in any way alarmed, yet he realized that death was probably not five minutes away. It was ten men against one, and he was unarmed. For a moment he entertained a feeling of bitterness against the cowpuncher who had sold him out. The feeling didn't last. Rather he felt pity for Wes McCrea. The fellow was weak rather than vicious.

"Well, Trego, there's no use you makin' us carry you to the river as long as you've got legs," Loose said with a thin-lipped smile. "Git goin'. The bridge will suit our purpose fine."

"I—I—think I'll stay here," Jed Irvine stammered.

"Yaller, huh?" Loose sneered. "All right, we won't need you."

Yates Trego was ordered to march out to the foot-bridge. As they went Loose picked out two of his men by name to aid him as executioner.

"We'll let him walk out on the middle of the bridge alone. If he prefers to be shot from the front we'll let him turn around," he said.

"I'll turn," Trego volunteered.

He knew that once he got out on that bridge nothing could save him. If he tried to leap off the bridge he would at least be wounded, and in those rapids even the strongest swimmer would stand no chance. But he meant to fight for his life, if it meant no more than rushing against a bullet. He was not going to be shot down like a sheep.

"I'd hoped I'd be able to test that alleged fast draw of yours, Loose," he remarked as he walked along. "I see it's mostly bluff like I always thought. You wouldn't have the guts to stand up to a man in a fair fight."

"Oh, yeh? Well, after just about two minutes you won't have to worry about it," the outlaw replied. Plainly he was not going to be lured by vanity into doing anything foolish.

"I suppose I'd accommodate you by standing on the edge of the bridge so I'll be sure to fall into the water?"

"That would be real thoughtful," Loose answered cynically.

"In that case—" Trego had reached the end of the bridge. He stopped and turned around. It was now or never.

"Git out on that bridge," Loose ordered coldly. "You beat me out of one big stake with that damned honesty of yours. See what it gets you now."

A trick, only a trick could do any good now. "Wait a minute," Trego urged. "I've got a money belt. 'There's no use takin' it to the bottom of the river. I wish you'd send it to my sister——"

There was neither money belt nor sister, but he had to get one of the men within arm's-reach. It worked.

"Why, that would be foolish wastin' all that money," Loose murmured in his usual sardonic tone. "I'll be glad to take care of it for you. Funny we didn't notice it when we searched you."

He stepped forward and, pressing the the muzzle of his gun against Trego's stomach with one hand, reached for the money belt with the other.

It seemed a lost hope. Not for even a second would Loose relax his caution. Trego's face had turned a sort of gray color, but it was from intensity of concentration rather than fear. He had raised both hands, and by sheer will power he compelled Charley Loose to meet his eyes. Then, for half a second the two men became rigid as the eyes of each spoke their silent hatred for the other. Only, Trego was not quite rigid. With that gun against his waist-line he cautiously bent his left knee.

Then, with the tremendous drive of a piston rod, he brought that left knee up. Up into Loose's groin. But, fast as he had been, he could not move without his intention being telegraphed to his enemy's brain. Even as the knee landed with terrific force, and Loose's face contorted with terrible agony as he started to collapse, the man pulled the trigger.

Yates Trego felt a searing pain along with an impact that turned him half around, but with the grimness of desperation he retained his footing. The shot, the sight of their leader going down had caught the other outlaws by surprise. Before they could move Trego was among them, his fists working like flails as he fought for his life.

CHAPTER X

AT BELLEVUE'S BRIDGE

TWO of the nine remaining members of the Warbonnet crew had elected to remain with Jed Irvine rather than witness the execution of Yates Trego. Chicken-hearted their leader had called them contemptuously. But even with Loose writhing upon the ground in agony there still remained six men on their feet to oppose Trego.

They were armed, but he was in the center of them, and they dared not use their guns for fear of hitting each other. They decided to gang up on him, and this gave Trego his one slender chance. Man after man seemed to melt down before the dynamite in his fists, but always there were others to take their places, and those who went down bobbed up again, though always with less vigor than when they had went down. They got in each other's way, and frequently received blows intended for Trego.

But plenty of their wild swings landed on the desperately fighting puncher. His wind was going and he was weakening,

but always he strove to bring the fight nearer the river bank. He couldn't get hold of a gun, so his only chance to escape was to take to the river. By great good luck he might be able to ride the current and eventually reach the bank. He was much more likely to be smashed in pieces against the rocks, and he knew it.

Irvine and the other two, aroused by the shouting, had rushed over, and now Charley Loose had got to his feet. The odds were ten to one. No man could long struggle against such odds.

"Git away from him, you fools, and give me a shot," Loose yelled when he got his breath back, but the men were too excited to heed the command at once.

A burly outlaw named Gus Sarns, whom Trego had floored with a right cross to the jaw, came up berserk. He rushed in swinging wildly. Somebody else had seized Trego from the back. Seeing that wild sledge-hammer blow coming Trego exerted his full strength and broke the hold of the man behind him. He ducked. Sarns' wild punch went over the puncher's head and struck the man behind Trego fair in the jaw. As that fellow went down, knocked out cold by his associate, Trego lunged forward and seized Sarns around the waist. Others were onto him now; his knees bent and he went down backward with Sarns directly on top of him, and still others were piled on top of Sarns.

But Trego's brain was still working. He had failed to reach the river. All he could hope for now was to get a gun and try to get as many of the killers as he could before they finished him.

One hand was free, and suddenly it closed upon the handle of the gun in Sarns' holster. He pressed the end of the barrel against the top of Sarns' hip, but he didn't fire. The other men had tumbled off of Sarns, but Trego held that worthy down.

"Stop! Hold everything," Charley Loose yelled. "You're actin' like a mob of schoolboys gittin' in each other's road, an' trampin' on each other's toes. I'll settle this business myself. Git up from there, Sarns."

"But, he's——" Sarns began.

"Git up," Trego hissed in his ear, and the fellow felt the muzzle of his gun press harder against his hip. Trego was holding the man in such a way that none of the others realized that he had got hold of Sarns' gun. When the fellow rolled to his feet Trego came up with him, almost like they were one body.

"Now, damn you, step out from behind there an' die like a man," Loose said. "Or would you rather be shot in the back?"

"I'll take it from the front, Loose," Trego said coolly. "Use yore hardware, Loose."

With one hand he thrust the giant Sarns stumbling to one side, while he side-stepped the other way. For the first time Charley Loose perceived that his prospective victim held a gun. And in Trego's eyes he read a resolution to get his chief foe, even though he knew he must die the next moment.

Loose had been caught with his weapon pointed at the ground. He brought it up with the snaky speed for which he had long been noted. But it was not enough. Though Trego stood on weakened legs that would hardly sustain his weight, his gun hand was steady as a rock. His bullet struck Charley Loose squarely in the heart.

So fast had been Loose's movements that his finger pressed the trigger even as he was hit. His bullet struck the ground almost between Sarns' feet, causing that worthy to leap high into the air with a startled yell. Charley Loose pitched full length on his face, and was dead in ten seconds.

That bit of action had taken place almost in the time a man could draw his breath. The outlaws had not recovered from their shock at seeing Sarns' gun in Trego's hand before their leader lay stretched dead at their feet. For a moment they were unable to either think or act.

Trego sensed his advantage. His gun was ready, he was facing them all, and he could kill the first man who moved. After that they would simply mow him down by mass action. But as yet none of them quite had the courage to make the first move.

BUT the man was in bad shape. He was aware that a steady stream of blood was running down his leg, and he had moments of acute nausea. Both the wound he had received and the desperate fight afterward had weakened him. He knew that he couldn't hold out much longer. Yet he faced them on wide-spread legs, the still smoking gun revolving on a level with their waistlines.

"Go on an' shoot, cowards," Trego taunted. "You were brave enough about hangin' Steve Bolivar when he was

wounded. Why don't you shoot. I won't be able to get more than two or three of you before you get me."

It was colossal bluffing, but it was the only chance he stood, and if they were going to act he wanted it to be before his strength left him entirely. He saw some of them glancing furtively at each other, trying to arrange a signal for simultaneous action. It wouldn't be long, he knew.

"Men! What's that?" Jed Irvine cried suddenly. "I heard horses. So-somebody's coming."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before four horsemen shot into sight fifty yards away where the trail broke down the bluff. The man ahead was Reckless Reese, and as he took in the tableau he let out a wild cowboy yell, which the two men behind him, Dewey Carson and Joe Henderson echoed wildly.

The fourth rider was Helen Malone, and as she topped the bluff, she turned for a moment in the saddle, and waved her arm behind her as though signaling other men to come on. It was quick thinking on her part, for there were no other men in sight.

For perhaps five seconds they were out of sight, then they broke into view almost upon the outlaws. The outlaws were on foot; the newcomers on horseback. The former felt their disadvantage. And they were still covered by that deadly gun in the hands of Yates Trego.

"Git 'em up, you swine!" Trego hissed, at exactly the right moment to catch them still befuddled. One by one, the more reluctant ones last, their hands went into the air.

Reckless and the others brought their horses to a sliding stop. Their guns covered the humiliated outlaws, but they had no excuse to shoot. Reckless looked at his leader, and then at the dead body of Charley Loose.

"We kinda imagined you might need help," Reckless grinned, "but it looks like you had the situation under control."

"You couldn't have come at a better time," Trego managed to smile. "They'd have got me in another minute. An'—an' I'm mighty happy to—to resign."

Black waves had been marching before his eyes for minutes. He slowly began to crumple; hanging onto his senses by sheer force of will. He was sick. Sicker than he could ever remember having been in his life. Only the fact that he had turned sideways when Loose had shot him had saved his life at all. But as it was the bullet had struck his hip bone a glancing blow that had deflected it along the side; ploughing a deep, ugly gash that would have been enough to have brought most men down.

Helen leaped from her horse and ran toward him with a cry of pity. He tried to wave her back, but the words wouldn't come. In a moment she had his head pillowed in her lap.

But the diversion had given Jed Irvine his chance. Or so he had believed. The moment Helen took her gun off him the man ducked behind the outlaws and raced for the brush. He headed straight for the river.

"Watch these hombres, boys," Reckless ordered, and with a grin that had something of the feline cruelty of a cat about it, he spurred around the outlaws in pursuit.

Irvine was almost to the thin line of river-washed brush before Reckless saw fit to call out, "Stop!" The fleeing man looked back over his shoulder, gave a despairing wail and plunged into the brush.

THERE was no shelter there and he should have known it. The thin line of willows was not enough to shelter him from the bullets tossed after him by the cowpuncher. But Reckless was not trying to hit him. Each bullet dropped so close to the man that he kept jumping. He was yelling something, but the grinning Reckless didn't seem to hear. He was now at the very edge of the river and dancing like a wild man.

"No, no!" he screamed like a frightened woman, and leaped out upon a spray-bathed boulder. "I can't swim."

A bullet from Reckless' gun struck the boulder between the man's feet and ricocheted off with a vicious whine. Irvine leaped high in the air, lost his balance, and disappeared into the turbulent stream with the wail of a lost banshee. His white face was visible for an instant just before he was sucked under the foot-bridge, and then it disappeared forever.

"He musta thought I was tryin' to hit him," Reckless said as he rode back to the others. "I wasn't shootin' at him." But just the same there was a peculiar glint in

the grinning puncher's eyes. Now he could feel that Steve Bolivar's murder had been avenged.

"But I don't understand how you happened to come here. I didn't expect anybody 'till dark," Yates Trego said sometime later. He lay in the shade, and he was surrounded by friendly faces. Judge Malone had arrived with over a dozen men half an hour after Jed Irvine's death. Trego's wound had been dressed, but his head still lay in Helen's lap.

"It was your own doing," Helen said. "You had sent my father both that note you found on the range, and the agreement which you took out of Irvine's pocket last night. We compared the handwriting of them under the microscope and it was not difficult to discover that Lawrence Hoan was the man who wrote that note.

"Father at once got busy. He told Hoan that he knew he was the man, and made him believe that Loose and his men would be wiped out tonight. Hoan admitted then that Middleton killed George Lester, and that they had most of them been forced to sign that agreement on penalty of death if they refused. When the others learned that one had told the truth they weren't long following suit. Long before morning Father had got the truth out of a dozen of them. When Sheriff Felch came back to town they had a posse waiting to arrest him. But before that Reckless told me you were going to be here, so we decided to ride on ahead and bring you the good news."

"An' you dang near got yourself killed by double-crossin' us," Reckless charged, as he grinned down at his employer. "Why the hell didn't you wait until tonight like you agreed? If Barstow, the boss of the GAMBLERS REST hadn't let it drop that Irvine paid Wes McCrea a big wad of money last night you might be fish food like Irvine is. But that made me suspect somethin' was wrong, an' me an' Dewey an' Joe, an' Helen here, burned the hoofs off our horses' feet gittin' down here. We couldn't leave this dang girl behind."

"You sure come in the nick of time," Trego smiled. "But I really wasn't tryin' to hog all the glory when I went to their camp alone."

"I know," Reckless said. "And after the way Wes McCrea sold us out I guess it was better that you did."

"You've got everything you want now, Yates," Judge Malone said. "You can have all the Warbonnet range if you want it, and if you'll only establish residence here you can be sheriff if you want to."

"I don't know about that, Judge," Trego said slowly. "I've got an idea that cowfolks are pretty nice people after all, take 'em by an' large, but I'm thinkin' of quittin' th' business myself."

Helen leaned close to his ear and whispered, "Why?" Her eyes were fixed steadfastly upon his face.

"Well, I always figured I could do something else in a pinch," he smiled. 'An' knowin' your opinion of cow people——"

"My opinion of you is all that matters," Helen said softly. "And that is—ace-high."

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A TRUE FEATURE OF THE WINNING OF THE WEST by

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GUNLESS GUNMAN

Clay comes back with a right that was a beauty. It was a real active scrap for a minute or two.

Clay McLean buckles on the old man's guns and shows that it takes more than bluster to prove courage.

by E. B. MANN

OLD MAN POMEROY lit his battered pipe and tossed the match-stub in the general direction of an ash tray on the window sill.

"There are lots of different kinds of men in the west." The Old Man packed the coal into his pipe as he soliloquized. "Take Webb Tucker, now. He rode the Chisholm trail with me, back in the old days. He was one two-fisted, two-gun slingin' miracle.

"Webb Tucker was a long, gangling, unwhipped cub with never a thought in his head beyond what he could see. He had a wart on the end of his chin, and——" The Old Man shut one eye and favored me with an insulting glare from the other orb. "——he chewed tobacco! Maybe you think there's no connection between chewin' tobacco and a wart on the chin. That's because you never saw Webb Tucker chew! He was a real determined chewer, Webb was. The way that wart jumped up and down was a sight to behold!

"Courage. Webb Tucker had his share of it. He wasn't scared of God nor man; didn't have the sense to be, I always thought. Or maybe he just knew what a sweet piece of fightin' machinery he was and figured he was safe. Webb was strong and he packed a kick in both hands, and he could thumb-roll a six-gun with speed and some dispatch. Sure he was brave. With

them assets, why wouldn't he be brave?

"It's a funny thing, courage." The Old Man punctuated his words with pulls on his pipe. "Some men have it and some don't. Then, again, there's different brands of it. Now you take Clay McLean for instance. . . ."

CLAY McLEAN was the sort of a man that would fit into one of those yarns they write about the west. He was a big square-shouldered kid with a mop of curly hair and a pair of nice blue eyes that sort of offset any mistakes there might have been in the rest of his features. And he had a smile that always made me think of a friendly pup. He was one of those men women want to mother and that men like in spite of that.

Only one thing was lackin' in Clay. He was *not* a gun-fightin' man. Them days, a man'd just about as lief be caught without his pants as without his gun. There was a feelin' then that a man who didn't tote a gun was shirkin' responsibility. You see, if a man was heeled and he did somethin' you didn't like, you could shoot him or let him shoot you and the thing was settled right then and there. But if a man didn't wear a gun, it was considered impolite to shoot him up. So the man who didn't wear a gun was thought to be takin' a sort of unfair advantage. Some folks was real out-spoken about it, claimin' that a man who went unarmed just plain lacked the guts to back his plays.

But Clay just laughed at 'em. Claimed he had no hankerin' either to shoot or be shot, so why should he weight himself down with a lot of heavy artillery?

Every other way, though, he was plumb man-sized. I knew him since he was a pup down in Texas and he was one of the men I picked to bring my trail herd north when I came here to settle. He was a top hand in the saddle and he knew cows. Far as courage is concerned, I've seen Clay bulldog a full-grown steer in real good time; which bulldoggin' ain't exactly a sissy pastime in any language.

Maybe you get what I'm drivin' at. Clay was a likeable boy and a darned good cattlemen; but when it come to fightin', well he wasn't the kind of man that you'd expect him to be.

That didn't keep Molly Clare from likin' him, though. Molly was a black-eyed little trick that came out here from Omaha to teach school over at Dry Creek. It was late spring when we landed here with that trail herd of mine and Molly was helpin' the Widow James run the postoffice, not havin' any school to teach right then. I sent Clay McLean to town the day after we got here and that was when he met Molly. Every cowhand in the valley was sparkin' Molly then, but it wasn't long 'fore Clay had the inside track. They kept company for about a year and most of Clay's competition died off for lack of encouragement. Folks was convinced it was just a matter of time till we'd have to start huntin' us another school ma'am. Nothin' official, you understand; only it just looked as if the youngsters had made up their minds.

So when Clay came to me with the news that he aimed to take his savin's and buy the Circle J spread, I put two and two together and made five, figurin' him and Molly was about ready to get hitched.

Two things happened then, real suddenlike. Cal Winters, over on the Bar 9, had been grumblin' for quite a spell, claimin' that his neighbors, the Three Stars bunch, was tryin' to hog the range. All of a sudden, now, Cal and his boys takes guns in hand to put a stop to it. There was some little preliminary skirmishes and, first thing we know, we've got a war on our hands with every cattle outfit in the valley takin' sides. Everybody, that is, but Clay McLean.

The thing sort of divided itself up geographically, so to speak. Folks up north of the river sided pretty generally with the Three Stars bunch, and us gentry here to the south swung in solid behind Winters. So, with Clay's new Circle J layin' between the two factions, Clay's idea of stayin' neutral was what you might call a highly optimistic one. But that's what Clay tried to do.

The second thing that happened was the arrival of Cal Winters' niece, Jane.

She reminded me of snow on a mountain top, Jane did. She was tall and slim and her hair was yellow and her skin was dead white and the way she carried her head looked like she was thinkin' what a shame it was she had to mingle with us common, earthy folks.

Maybe she wasn't like that at all. I had no less than six otherwise sane cowboys tell me, private-like, that she was an angel.

But she looked to me as if she'd be a doggone cold and disappointin' reward for the trouble it'd be to climb up to where she was. I may have been wrong.

Well, Clay rode down to see me about a week after this new girl arrived and we had a long talk. Clay was determined he wouldn't be dragged into this Bar 9-Three Stars fracas. But he was worried. One of his punchers had stopped some lead the night before, and Clay was pretty sure it was Three Stars lead. Feller wasn't hurt so much as he was aggravated. Clay tells me, too, that somebody took a shot at him about a week before that, which I hadn't known till then. Bullet drilled a hole in Clay's hat, making Clay real thankful he wasn't no taller'n what he was!

"It's a real discouragin' situation," Clay says to me. "The Three Stars bunch figure I'll side in with Winters because you and Winters are friends and I used to ride for you. And Winters and his south-range bunch are sore because I *haven't* sided in with 'em. I don't know what the hell to do."

He'd named the situation just about as it was, too. Clay's range sort of straddled the line between the two factions, occupying a position either side would've give a lot to hold. Winters would do his level best to force Clay to come in on his side of the feud, and the Three Stars outfit would be mighty apt to try to shove Clay off the Circle J by any means that came to hand. Shootin' one of Clay's riders and ambushin' Clay himself was just a sample of how far the thing was apt to go.

I gave the kid the best advice I had. "Go to Winters," I said, "and tell him you're throwin' in with him. That way you'll be friends with one side, anyway. And the Three Stars bunch is against you already."

Clay nods, but he ain't happy. "I reckon that's the best way," he says. "But, damn it, Pop, I hate to mix into a fight that don't concern me. Or any fight, for that matter."

That sort of stuck in my craw and I told the boy what I thought. "It concerns you, looks like to me," I said, "when they start shootin' up your men! You do what I tell you and you do it quick, 'fore you get yourself pinched between the two sides. It's all well enough to avoid trouble if you can, but there's times when a man's got to fight. This here is one of them times. You go see Winters!"

Clay seemed convinced. "All right," he said. "I'll see Winters tonight, at the dance."

It seemed somebody had chose this particular time to throw a party for Winters' niece and had hired the Odd Fellows Hall in town to give a dance. All my boys was wastin' the day preparin' for it, so it wasn't any news to me. Likely Winters would be on his way to town 'fore Clay could get to him anyway, so I let it go at that.

"You better be on your way if you're aimin' to hit that dance on time," I says. "It's a long ride over to Dry Creek and back to town."

Clay sort of blushed. "I ain't takin' Molly to the dance," he says. "I'm takin' Jane."

Well, I set right down and lit a pipe and cogitated on the plumb damn-foolishness of men in general and some men in particular. I'd heard that Clay was buzzin' around this new girl some, but I never thought the kid was fool enough to ditch Molly Clare for her. And that's what it meant, his takin' Jane to this here dance. This shindig was aimed to be the outstandin' social event of the year and every man would take his best girl to it. Unless some other man asked her first, he would, anyway.

But I knew from experience it's no use buttin' in on another man's business where a woman is concerned; so I didn't say anything to Clay.

Molly was there, all right, in spite of Clay's givin' her the go-by. She came with a youngster from over on Dry Creek and you'd never know from lookin' at her that she wasn't havin' the time of her life. Maybe she was. Anyway, she sure wasn't lackin' for partners. It looked like some of the boys had sort of got their hopes revived, seein' Clay had stepped out of the picture, and was givin' her a special rush.

Clay and Jane didn't get there till late, which didn't surprise me none. You could tell by lookin' at Jane that she was the kind of a woman that'd spend an hour in front of a lookin' glass, no matter who was waitin' on her. But Clay comes struttin' in beside her with his head in the clouds. He brings her right over to me and, after that, I'll have to admit I ain't blamin' him so much. It was the first time she ever favored me with so much as a glance, and when she turned them eyes of hers on a man it was like takin' a drink out of a teacup and findin' that somebody had put

whiskey in instead of tea. Jarred you, if you know what I mean.

Practically the whole county had turned out to that dance and it didn't surprise me much to see that six or eight of the Three Star boys had rode down, too. I knew some of them and some I didn't. There was talk goin' around that they'd hired some new men; gunmen. I was willin' to believe it after takin' a look at the delegation present at this dance. Of course, everybody had to check their hardware before comin' onto the floor; but two or three of them Three Star boys was tough lookin' hombres even without their guns.

One of them, especial, had a swaggerin', go-to-hell way that sort of riled me. You know how it is sometimes; you just take a dislike to a man and you don't stop to figure why. It was like that with me about this jasper; Turner, his name was; Jed Turner. He was a big red-headed man with a pair of big red hands that looked like hams. I noticed his hands when he was dancin' with this Jane girl. She had on a white dress, cut sort of low in the back, and this Turner's hand against her back as they waltzed—it didn't look right, somehow.

But Jane seemed to be enjoyin' it. He was a good-enough lookin' man, givin' the devil his due. Him and Clay was about the only men there that kept on lookin' tall when they danced with Jane, her lookin' even taller than she was in this closefittin' dress she's wearin'. It got to be sort of a race between the two of them to see who'd dance with her the most.

I watched that a while and then I cornered one of the Three Star boys, feller by the name of Daugherty, and I pointed out to him that Turner wasn't makin' himself a whole lot popular monopolizin' Jane that way. Maybe I sort of hinted that it was sort of unthoughtful for the Three Stars to horn in here anyway, things bein' like they were.

But Daugherty just grinned at me. "It'd be too bad," he says, "if anybody tried to *stop* Red from dancin' with her. Folks down Sonora way don't figure it's healthy to cross that Turner man. And, as far as the rest of your remark goes, it may surprise you some to learn that the Three Stars will horn in where-ever and when-ever the spirit moves!"

Which wasn't friendly, any way you look at it. But it set me thinkin'. Them names, Jed Turner and Sonora, got to mixin' in my mind and pretty soon I figured out a connection. A two-gun hombre called Sonora Red had been gettin' himself talked about some on account of some plain and fancy shootin' he'd been doin'. This Jed Turner bein' a red-head, it wasn't hard to guess that him and this Sonora Red was identical.

It wasn't hard to go on from there and figure some other things, too. Clay McLean was a stumblin' block in the way of the Three Stars' aim to control the range. This Sonora Red person used two guns real indiscriminate, from what I'd heard, and fast. Not to mention fatal. If he used them on Clay, now, it wouldn't exactly be a tragedy from the Three Stars point of view; and there's no surer way of startin' a fight with a man than by pickin' on his girl. And so, thinks I, there's somethin' due to happen soon.

Sure enough it happened. Just as I got through interviewin' Daugherty in the interests of peace, Clay and Turner heads for Jane to claim a dance. Clay gets there first and Jane's just steppin' off with him when Turner arrives. Turner says somethin' and Clay looks inquiringly at Jane. Jane smiles and shakes her head at Turner and holds out her arms to Clay again.

And Turner got ugly. He stuck one of those big hands of his past Clay and got hold of Jane's arm. "You're makin' a mistake," he said. "This here is my dance."

Jane don't help matters any. She jerks her arm loose and tilts her chin up and says somethin' I don't catch. Clay looks sort of flabbergasted and says somethin' to Turner. He was smilin' sort of apologetic-like. And Turner hits him.

It was a real surprisin' thing the way that left of Turner's lifted Clay right off his feet and onto the back of his neck. It surprised Clay, anyway. Didn't give him a chance to decide whether he wanted to fight or not, seemed like. He was fightin', whether he liked it or not!

Well, Turner went for Clay with his boots and Clay grabs hold of one of those boots and climbs right up Turner's leg and heaves Turner over backward into a row of chairs against the wall. The chairs smashed and Turner crawls out from among 'em and goes for Clay.

Folks was yellin' by that time and tryin' to separate 'em. But it was a real active

scrap in spite of that for a minute or two. Clay gets in a couple of rights that jars Turner right down to his heels, and Turner lands another hook that don't do Clay's eye any good.

I got a grip on Turner finally, along with three-four other peacemakers, and somebody else got Clay. It was all over so quick that the Three Stars outfit had no time to join in and make a free-for-all of it and I was thankin' my stars there hadn't been no guns in the crowd. Things was bad enough as it was.

Well, we packed Turner out of there and across the street to the Drovers' Bar. He was doin' a lot of cussin', tellin' what he'd do to Clay the minute he got his guns. I tried to discourage him, but it wasn't any use. No man could lay a fist on him and live, he says. So I dropped a hint or two about how Clay was a local boy with quite a parcel of friends and if anything happened to him it might be sort of unpleasant for whoever was the cause of it. Which calmed him down some. I could see that, but I could see, too, that he wasn't through. He had a reputation that had to be maintained, the way he figured it; and Clay had put an eye on him that was goin' to attract considerable attention.

Most men, if they get joshed about havin' a black eye, can grin and suggest that you take a look at the other man. But a gun-fighter is pretty apt to feel that the only dignified come-back for *him* is to tell you to go take a look at the other man's gravestone!

Besides that, I'll always figure Turner was sent to town that night for the specific purpose of gettin' Clay McLean and he couldn't go back to the Three Stars without makin' a stab at it.

I drifted back to the dance after while and there's Clay with a patch over his eye and a swellin' on his jaw, dancin' with Jane again. It was easy to see that she was mighty proud of him. She was layin' the possessive stuff on thick, and Clay was sort of sheepish about it. He knew that, if he'd had time to think and talk a little, he'd have ducked that fight; and it sort of embarrassed him to have her hold him up as a shinin' hero.

It was 'most midnight 'fore we heard from Turner again. The Ladies' Aid had cooked up a stack of food for the folks and a recess had been called in which to eat it. Clay had brought Jane over close to me and we was gettin' better acquainted-like when Cal Winters comes walkin' in and heads for Clay. I saw Clay turn sort of white and I knew that he knew, same as I did, that Winters was bringin' trouble in no small-sized chunk. You could tell it by the look on Winters' face.

Cal comes to a halt in front of Clay and his voice sounds like he was announcin' a funeral. "Turner is down in the Drovers' Bar," Cal says, "and he's tellin' all and sundry how he aims to shoot you down. If somethin' ain't done, he'll come up here after you. And it wouldn't do to have a shootin' scrape here, among these women folks." Cal was real upset, judgin' by his tone of voice. "It's sort of up to you, Clay," he says. "What do you aim to do?"

It was a mighty hard thing for a man to face, comin' up against it all of a sudden like that. And havin' Jane there to hear it didn't make it any easier. But there wasn't anything anybody could do about it. Them days, if you got yourself into a jam and the other fellow made war-talk like Turner was doin', you either accommodated him or you tucked your tail and hunted you a spot where your shame hadn't been heard of yet. It was a code, like duelin' and the like. A tough code, maybe. I ain't defendin' it. But there it was. You got to remember that about the only law we had, them days, was what a man packed on his hip.

Clay sort of stuttered. "I—I ain't a gun-fighter, Cal," he says. "If Turner wants to fight—with his hands—." He didn't finish it.

"You know that ain't what he means, son." Cal was sort of reprovin'.

"Then—I reckon I better drift." Clay's voice was sort of low and sick. "I could go out the back way, maybe—"

He stopped talkin' all of a sudden and I see he's watchin' Jane. She's starin' at him and her face is sort of rigid-like. Cold as ice, it looked to me.

He put out his hand and touched her. "But Jane!" he said. "That man is a—a killer! I can't—"

She didn't jerk away from him like she'd done from Turner, her voice wasn't what you'd call affectionate. "What you do," she said, "is no affair of mine. If you prefer to run—"

She shrugged. That shrug made her meanin' pretty clear.

She stood up then and walked away. Clay was still lookin' after her when he spoke to me. "Pop," he said, "I'd like the loan of your gun."

His chin was up, too, now, defiant-like. But he was scared; froze stiff with fear. I tried to reason with him. "You can't go up against a man like Turner, son," I said.

To hell with the code, I was thinkin' then. Of course, it ain't a nice thing to be called a coward; but a man can be a coward for a long, long time and, in this case, it looked like Clay couldn't be brave more'n a few minutes at most! Seemed like to me he was too nice a kid to let him throw his life away.

"I won't let you do it," I said. "If you go down to meet him and you're wearin' a gun you'll be playin' right into his hands. He can kill you then and call it self-defense."

"If he kills me," Clay says, "it won't make much difference to me what he calls it. If you won't loan me your gun I'll have to borrow one from someone else."

I got my gun and strapped it on him. If he was set on committin' suicide, it might as well be my gun as any.

Molly came runnin' across the floor and starts askin' questions, but Clay just looks at her and let's Cal Winters talk to her. She tried to stop him, but he pushed her off.

"I'd like to have you come along, Pop," he said.

That was better than I'd expected. "You bet!" I said. "Cal, let me have your gun."

But Clay said, "No. You'll come unheeled. I aim to handle this myself."

So I went along with him, and I didn't wear a gun. I'm tellin' you, there was chills chasin' up and down my spine as we went across that street! I knew Turner wouldn't be alone, and I figured it was about an even bet that them Three Stars boys wouldn't notice me not bein' armed in time to do me any good. And it wasn't goin' to be pleasant, either, to stand by and see the kid shot down without bein' able to take a hand.

Turner was standin' at the bar when we walked into the Drovers', and he wasn't alone. Dougherty was with him, and three other men. Turner swung around as we came in and I saw him grin.

Clay stopped just inside the door and motioned me off to one side. "I hear you been makin' talk about me, Turner," he said.

It got awful still in that room then. Turner's face got sort of purple.

"I'm gettin' tired of havin' my men shot up and of dodgin' lead myself, and of hearin' talk. If you Three Stars hombres ain't a bunch of four-flushin' skunks, suppose you do your talkin'—and your shootin'—to my face for a change!"

It didn't sound like Clay McLean talkin'. Not to me, it didn't. I looked sideways at him to make sure I wasn't dreamin'. His face was as white as chalk, but his voice was firm enough. You could see he meant what he said. He was facin' certain death and nobody knew it better'n him; but he was *facin'* it. That's somethin'!

Turner knew that Clay was scared, and he was puzzled. Somethin' was worryin' him. It wasn't until he spoke that I knew what it was.

"It's a smart trick, mister," he said. "But it ain't a-gonna work! You can't talk me into makin' a draw just to give your friends a chance to cut me down!"

Clay didn't understand it, but I did. Clay never took his eyes off Turner. "Pomeroy ain't in on this," he said. "He ain't even got a gun. Anyway, you're five to two. That should be odds enough."

"Five to two—*in sight!*" Turner said. "That ain't sayin' how many friends you got outside them windows there, waitin' for me to make a move!"

I almost laughed. It was easy to see how Turner figured it, of course. I'd warned him, myself; told him if he made a play at Clay he'd have Clay's friends to whip. He was rememberin' that. Knowin' that Clay was scared of him, he figured Clay never would stand up to him like this unless there was a trap set. And Turner had no intention of springin' that trap!

Puttin' it into words that way, he'd transmitted his own fear to the other Three Stars boys. You could see 'em watchin' the windows and movin' their hands away from their guns.

Clay took a long deep breath. He didn't understand it, but he aimed to do a job of it while he was at it. "So you're yellow, eh?" he said, insultin' as all get out. "Just like I thought! If guts was buckshot, yours would rattle around inside a walnut shell! . . . Well, you've had your chance. Now I'll tell you a thing or two: You drift! Slope out o' here, sabe? Because if ever

I catch you around here again I'll stretch your mangey hide on a cactus frame! . . . Come on, Pop. Let's you and me get out o' here. The smell is sickenin'!"

It was a real man-sized talk, you got to admit. And he got away with it. There was a ticklish minute or two while we was crossin' the street, me wonderin' how soon Turner and his friends would find out there wasn't anybody outside them windows and take a shot at us. But nothin' happened. We got across the street all right and, in a little while, we see Turner and the Three Stars outfit fork their broncs and high-tail out of town.

Turner kept right on goin', too.

It didn't take long for it to get known that Clay hadn't had any backin' on the deal like Turner'd thought he had, and when Turner found that out he just headed back to Texas rather than face the music. His dignity as a badman was sort of frayed, you see, and he couldn't see any way of mendin' it. He could've killed Clay, of course, but that wouldn't've helped him any. It would've just proved that he'd been backed down by a man he could've killed if he'd had the guts to draw.

. . . Which just goes to show you never want to crowd a man too far when he's scared. You scare him bad enough, he's apt to jump right down your throat and strangle you!

THE Old Man grinned a reminiscent grin. "But look here!" I said. "You can't leave the story half told! What about Clay? I suppose he married Jane—"

"Jane? Hell, no!" The Old Man chuckled. "He married Molly! You couldn't get him near Jane, after that. He was scared she'd get him in another fight!"

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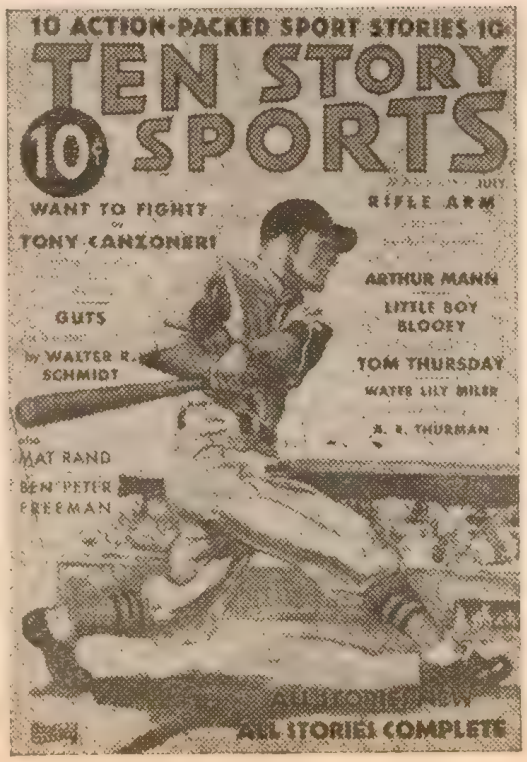

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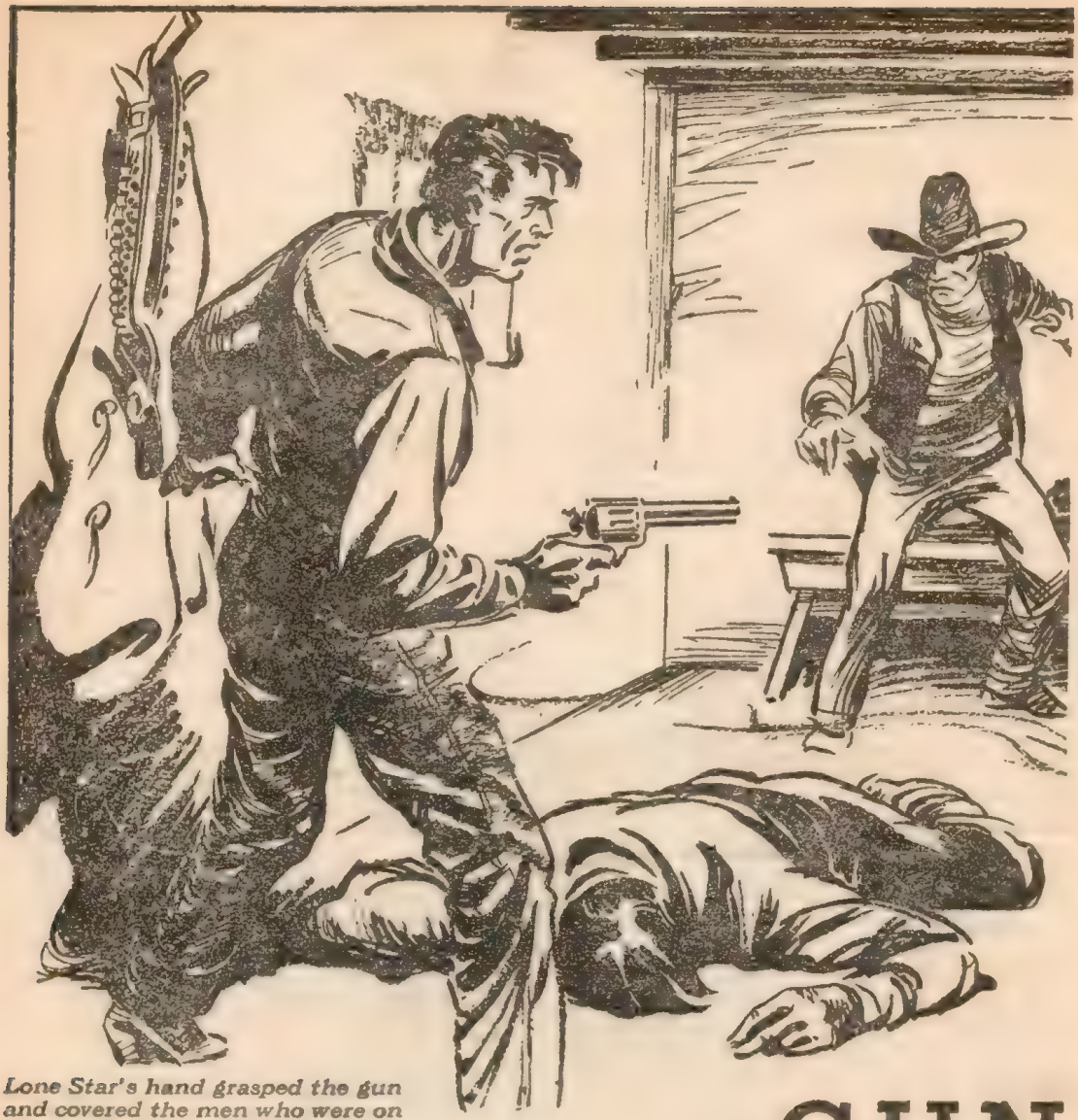

Lone Star's hand grasped the gun and covered the men who were on the point of attacking him.

GUN

by CLIFF

A HOT - LEAD LAWLESS

Up from Texas came Lone Star Bill against as dirty a pack of plug-

CHAPTER I

MURDER

NATURE had been prodigal with Paradise Valley.

The valley was as lovely as the name some first settler had given it. It was well watered and protected. On three sides it was hemmed by fine, high, heavily timbered hills over which grew rich grasses, and through which was much cold, sweet water. Truly the region was a horse heaven and a cow paradise. To the west reared the Ghost Mountains which constituted immense ramparts, forbidding storms to enter and desert cattle from straying into the valley, for over the range there were but few passes and these were easily fenced.

Men seemed happy there, seemed remarkably free from all menace, and counted themselves singularly lucky in being given the privilege to work out their destinies and fortunes in such a wonderfully serene setting.

SLICK
CAMPBELL

NOVEL OF THE FRONTIER

Ryan to match his wits and guns uglies as ever dry-gulched a waddy.

To the east stretched the White Sands—*the white sands!*

And these were detestable. They were avoided as though they were something hateful, some vast and evil area designed to plague and torment man. The White Sands.

They were always creeping, creeping, slowly to be sure, but creeping, all the time. The movement was toward the mouth of the beauteous valley, and east winds, which prevailed but occasionally, were the cause of the sands' encroachment. Inhabitants of that valley stared at the blazing extent of white fire and shuddered as a white light filled their vision.

Out beyond these beds of ghastly white was nothing—that is, nothing but the East, the States. Back that way lay home, the youth of most of the men, the way toward which some of them could not go, for sorrow, of some character, lay over and beyond that horizon. Sorrow or—penalty.

But the creep of the sands, the edging closer and closer of their dusty mounds, knolls, and their armies of dunes, was in-

deed but very, very minute. Fifty yards a storm, men said. That is, surveyors said this. But fifty yards a storm meant much.

Ultimately, unless western winds threw back those sands, the valley would be surfaced with a miserable white floor, for the sands covered an area as great as the valley's bottoms and were capable of filling the depression. It would take years, but—

Yet, for a time, success seemed to make those rugged pioneers oblivious to those sands. Cattle fattened, hay and grain grew, and men were happy. Unlike other border regions the cowmen had been free from rustlers and all manner of crime.

Cowboys jogged into the region, went to work, stayed a month or a year, jogged on again and thus gave all ranches a full quota of expert labor. But thievery was a thing unknown. And then, out of a clear sky, out of an almost sluggish sense of security, fear came to dwell in Paradise Valley. And with it awe, alarm, shaking suspicion and quavering mistrust; for each man, somehow, suspected some other man. It came about in this way.

SAM HARRIS'S body had been found with a bullet through its head. He had been killed as he had sat at his table. And evidence left in that room, on that table beside the dead man, had screeched aloud that Sam Harris had fed some one before he was ruthlessly shot down as he ate. Whoever had partaken of the dead rancher's fare had had a queer appetite on which to train his stomach for murder.

This wretch had eaten six fried eggs—Sam never ate eggs—had consumed nearly a pound of mesquite honey. The jar, which had been a gift to Sam a few days before, had been left at the plate of him who had sat opposite to the dead man. Then the fellow shaved. Shaved with Sam's razor and had left the cup, soap and brush beside a lather covered piece of paper. On a cross bar of the table, exactly where a man would set his boots as he ate, was a smear of blood red earth. That dried adobe had come from some place. Where? No man knew, for in all that valley there was none of this earth.

It resembled red pipe-stone. And was of the texture of potter's clay. It took no artist to understand that on the boots of the killer this earth had clung until the man had scraped it off on the table.

Bad news travels fast, and soon Sam's killing was known all over Paradise, and up at Eagle Rock, the small town which nestled to the north in the foothills. Gaunt fear stalked the valley. All men checked up on strange riders and none of these had been reported as passing through for a week. Who then had murdered kindly old Sam Harris? The answer would not come.

In less than a week Jed Burdock was found hanging to a cottonwood limb by his own rope. And the tree showed no marks which would indicate that Jed had climbed it to the first branch and then had jumped with intent to slay himself in this awful manner.

Examination disclosed that Jed had been hoisted to his death and strangled in this fashion. The path of the rope showed clearly that whoever had hanged Jed had jerked him from his feet with a rope evidently fixed to a saddle horn. A small bump back of Jed's ear told of a blow which had knocked him senseless. But it was Jed's kitchen which sent men's minds racing with angered furies.

The man who had killed Jed had eaten with him.

Had eaten six eggs and almost a pound of mesquite honey, and had shaved. And on the floor near the table were bits of blood red earth.

A RIOT of anger filled all the peaceful region. And while Eagle Rock had no law, nor law officer, the citizens and merchants there, even the gamblers and saloon keepers, volunteered to comb all the hills and gulches for stray humans.

But the search revealed nothing. Weeks passed. The consternation quieted and the hard life of those simple men compelled them to lapse into a dull forgetfulness.

Of a sudden panic struck Eagle Rock. Its largest outfitting store had been robbed and three thousand in gold taken from its strong box. Evidently the robber had been frightened before he had finished his job for he left a Winchester leaning against a counter. The number of this gun, together with some carving on its stock, was broadcasted to sheriffs and town marshals. And on the floor of the store was found some sticky red earth, and clearly this had been intentionally scraped from boots, so that it might be found. Who ever did that crime had a purpose in leaving that mud behind him.

A cowboy from Paradise Valley stared

at the Winchester and then exclaimed, "Why, that's Jed Burdock's gun. I know it by that carving on the stock."

Now here was grim jest and base humor. The thief of that store had told the world that he who had hung Jed had stolen the merchant's gold.

But who was this poltroon who struck such hideous blows and left so much evidence back of him and yet never a sign to trail him by?

And as though to add to the certainty of the universal despair, a clerk in the store reported the loss of a quart jar of strained mesquite honey. Grim faces twitched and men were silent when they met! And to make the situation all the more tense, travelers, when they passed each other, rode wide, hands gripping guns, and turned in their saddles as they went by.

Every man was under the distrust of every other man.

Out of the smoke of this terror arose a stalwart figure, that of Tim Cook, who once had been sheriff of a middle Texas county and was known as square in every way. Tim gathered a dozen or more citizens of town and valley, known to him to be all the border demanded of a rancher, and with them conferred. They reposed in him the task of solving the mystery of their valley.

So Tim wrote an old friend in his home town in Texas and asked that some expert tracker, trailer and man-hunter be sent secretly to him. Graphically he recited what had taken place in Paradise and at Eagle Rock. And strongly did he insist that his friend give this information to any man he chose to send.

In due time came a letter from this friend telling Tim that Lone Star Bill Ryan would present himself to Tim Cook and would carry a patch of paper which would fit a torn-off part of the letter which Tim was then reading. The grizzled cowman dropped his eyes and noted a missing corner of the white sheet.

With that in his hand he rode to a neighbor's house and read the missive to him. He even told that neighbor that in case Lone Star Bill arrived during Tim's absence from his home, for he intended going on the morrow after some strays, that this neighbor was to demand of Lone Star Bill the passport of identification which would fit the torn section of the letter.

It was agreed that the letter would be hidden deep in Tim's bean sack and thus could be brought out to be matched with the part Bill presented as his credentials.

"ALL right, Tim," answered Terry Hopwood the neighbor, "I'll make it a point to watch your place; but to do this I'll have to ride up on that ridge. And I'm going to busy myself mending fence on my hayland. But twice a day I'll take a look."

"I don't think you'll have to watch much," answered Tim, "for if he comes he'll have to pass your place first and then you can see him, or talk to him, when he asks directions to my spread. If any of my boys was at home it'd be different; but they're all busy over on the range combing the above-timberline pastures, and they won't be back for more'n a week."

"Well," said Terry Hopwood, "if he's a tracker and a trailer he'll find your outfit from the description you sent your friend. This Lone Star has got your letter by now, ain't he?"

"Yep, and come to think of I mapped out the route to my place all the way from Horsehead Crossing. Maybe he won't bother you. Perhaps I'd better leave a note on my table for this fella, and just tell him to camp in my shack till I gets back."

"That's more like it."

"Good-by, Terry."

"Adios, Tim. I like that name, Lone Star Bill Ryan. Sounds like a fella what's got weasel cunning in his makeup."

"That old podner of mine wouldn't send me no apple knocker to do this trick. He's a hound dog his ownself, and if he picked this Lone Star it's a cinch the boy knows how to weed his greens."

The friends parted. And that was the last Terry Hopwood ever saw of Tim Cook, *alive*.

Six days later one of his friends passed his house on the dead run, and waved him to follow. Terry saddled a pony and raced after the fleeing horseman. Some three miles away lay Tim Cook's outfit and toward this Terry galloped with a great fear chilling his heart.

When he reached Tim's house he saw the yard full of ranchers.

One of them motioned to the opened door of the kitchen.

Into the room he went and past a silent group of staring men. Tim Cook was seen slumped down in his chair, a bullet between

his eyes. Terry glanced at a rancher who raised his hand and pointed to a small hole in a window pane. That told the tale of that homicide. Tim had been shot as he was about to sit down to a meal.

"Who found him?" asked Terry.

"I did," answered Jap Malone. "I was riding this way along about day-break and seen Tim's light. When I got into the room there he was, as he is now. I busted out and went for help and when we got back we started combing the outside dirt for a trail; but, shucks, the ground is all cluttered up with pony tracks and they ain't nothing to go on."

"Same fella," remarked someone. "He ate eggs and honey."

"And there's a big gob of his red mud right on that table bottom. Who ever done it musta knowed Tim had been chosen to end all this trouble. And that says that some one of us fellows in this valley, some one who knew that Tim had the trailing job of this hombre, either tipped off the killer or is the skunk himself. All us boys got to get ourselves lily-white of suspicion or it's going to be hell and repeat in Paradise from this on."

"Looka yonder," another cried. "The guy what sloughed Tim shaved hisself, right alongside that sink."

At this exclamation all eyes in the room centered on the door. In it stood a tall, rather good looking cowboy, a stranger to all there, smiling, dust-covered and road-stained.

"Boys," he said, "they told me in the yard that Tim had been butchered. Where is he?"

MEN moved aside to afford the stranger a glance at the corpse.

And as the man strode toward it and looked down on Tim's huddled form, for a long time, Terry Hopwood went to a corner of the room and stuck his hand far into the bean sack. Then he edged through his neighbors and touched the young stranger on the arm.

"You knew Tim, didja?" he asked.

"Nope, but I was expecting to meet him."

"Meaning which?"

'That he sent to a friend of mine for a certain kind of cowboy. I'm that kind. What's on your mind, podner?"

"Has you got anything to prove what you says?"

"I don't know's I have, why?"

"Then you better do some fast thinking, fella," a flush faced rancher spoke, a menace to his words. "This ain't no healthy spot for strangers, right this minute. Talk fast, you!"

"Not me. I gotta have a opening first. If one of you knows Tim's business with me you'll speak. If you don't I'll be riding on to Eagle Rock."

Out came the gun in the hand of the rancher who had demanded the identity of the stranger. "Look at this hombre's boots, boys!" shouted the inflamed cowman. "Look at the mud on them heels! I means the color of it!"

A gasp came as men's eyes took in that pair of fine boots.

Then a hand reached for the red mud that clung in a peculiar way to a support of the table before which Tim's corpse sat.

'Don't move that mud," cried the stranger in a calm and curious tone, "let it lay right where it is. If you boys has got sense you must know that this is a *lonesome* job for some one man, and I aims to be that fella."

Terry smiled and laid a hand on the youth's shoulder.

"Has you got a torn piece of paper with you?" he asked.

The face of the young stranger wreathed itself into smiling lines. "Sure," he said. "Now you're telling me something I've been a-craving to hear. I'm Lone Star Bill Ryan boys, and here's the patch to match what you oughta have."

He brought out a piece of paper and gave it to Terry. Terry laid it beside the paper he had taken from the bean sack. The two parts fitted one into the other. Seeing this Lone Star Bill spoke.

"And here's Tim Cook's letter telling me what you-all been up against. That's why I didn't want that mud taken from that cross arm. I think that thing is a-going to come in mighty handy, for me."

"I feels like a sheep-killing dog," said the rancher who had drawn his gun. "But, Lone Star, we don't trust nobody no more."

"I understands," said Bill Ryan, "I'm feeling thataway myself."

The men in the yard crowded into the room.

Lone Star Bill stared at the lather covered paper on the sink. Then he walked to it and examined it with a pocket mineral glass.

"Is they a red head around here?" he asked.

"Not a one in the valley," answered Terry, "but there's three or four in Eagle Rock. Why?"

"Because the fellow what rubbed his whiskers on this paper had a red beard."

"Good Lord," exclaimed some one. "Just think of that now. Why didn't I see that? I was staring at that paper for a long time."

"If you boys don't mind," said Lone Star Bill, "I'd like all of you to get out of this room. Terry, you stay. That'll be all I'll want for a little while. But don't none of you-all go away. We oughta decide a lot of things as soon as I get a good look-see over this kitchen."

WITHOUT reply the men left the room. Only Terry remained.

"You knows about that red mud, does yuh?" he asked.

"Yep," answered Lone Star Bill, "I stepped in some of the same color. But, man, that gumbo is a long, long ways from here. Does you think all them boys, outside, can be trusted?"

"I reckon so. Why?"

"Because I don't want but few people to know I'm at work in this valley."

Terry stiffened, looked around the room. Then examined the table at which drooped the dead man. "What you looking for?" asked Lone Star Bill.

"Tim left a note here addressed to you. I can't find it. And that means that—"

"Too bad," interrupted Lone Star, "now whoever did this killing knows as much about me as you-all. Tim oughtn't to have done that. But," he seemed to rouse from his concern, "maybe that's all right, too. From this on out he'll work more carefully and that'll give me just the chance I'm a-laying for."

"What?"

"To see who's back of this wolf. You don't think murdering plain, old, common-run, cowmen is a one-man job, do you?"

"Lone Star, you runs too many to the dozen for me. I don't getcha, none, atall. Explain yourself."

"The fella what did these killings has some other purpose in his work. I ain't silly enough to believe that he killed men and never stole nothing, just for fun. Then what was his aim? I thinks he wants to put the fear of God in all your hearts. Now, if he thinks there's a under-cover rider combing around, all the time, he'll head for the fellow who hired him."

"You reckon it's a grudge and somebody else was paying him to pull off these killings?"

"Nope. I thinks these murders was done to intimidate this valley and get you-all to watching each other. The real purpose will come out, soon. I'll be the next victim, if they can get me."

"They?"

"Yes. This killer is just a smart butcher, but he's working under some brain that's weaving the web for him. Now let's see what we can get out of signs left in this room."

Terry stared at the young face in amaze. Truly the name Lone Star Bill fitted the boy. His eyes were large, calm, and sad. His face wan, drawn and curiously suggestive of a man who lived much within himself. The very manner in which he walked and moved about the room gave forth the thought that he was indeed a lonely human being.

Terry watched him with a curious admiration.

And as he stared he marveled at the apparent vigor of Bill.

CHAPTER II

THE FEAR SPREADS

LIKE the pealing of discordant bells the anxious cowboys outside heard the mumbling voices of Bill and Terry. How the moments dragged, and how everyone wondered what magic would result from the presence of that stranger within the room where the body of Tim lay! Then he came; came smiling, a wistful friendliness about his face. The hearts of that rough crew watching him opened and admitted him as friend, immediately.

"Boys," he said, in a slow, musical drawl, "here's what I found. Tim was killed by a bullet fired from back of that tree yonder. Behind it the man stood."

"How you know that?" asked Jap Malone. "I examined that spot and I didn't see a boot mark."

"All the same the killer stood there. I squinted a eye through the hole in the glass and it leveled my line on the outside of that tree. Let's take a look at the ground there."

The men stepped behind Lone Star and

circled the tree. Not a sign was to be found which resembled boot marks. Lone Star began to walk in a semi circle. Ten feet from the tree he came to a spot where half a boot sole showed in several places; then a straight indentation appeared in the soil. He raised his eyes suddenly. Then came his remarkable smile.

"One of you fellows go take a look at that plank lying ag'in the barn," he said genially. A man hurried to the plank. This was a one-inch board, ten inches wide and twelve feet long. It had been surfaced on both sides. And it was new.

"Whatta you see?" asked Lone Star.

"The side next to the barn is filled with pieces of gravel, and dirt. That side has been flat on the ground, right recent," came the answer.

"How's the ends?"

"One looks like it had been standing on the ground."

"That's what I was expecting," said Lone Star Bill. "Whoever fired a gun at Tim must 'a' been back of that tree waiting and must 'a' packed that board there to stand on. Then, after killing Tim, he packed it back again."

"That board," said Terry, "belonged to some finished lumber that Tim intended using to make some extra bunks out of, for his boys. It's exactly like some of that other stuff what will be found piled under his machinery shed. He never brought that board out and let it lay. Not Tim. He was too good a hand to do that, for such lumber costs money, in this valley."

"That tells the tale," said Lone Star. "The killer must 'a' been watching for Tim, maybe for several nights, and there being nobody around his place he used that board more'n once. Otherwise them gravel marks mightn't be so deep on one side. I reckon, boys, you needn't feel skeered of each other any more, and I reckon, too, you can go on home and rest easy about anybody in this valley doing that killing, or the others.

"What makes you say that?" asked Jap Malone.

"Because of them red whiskers in the dried lather and because of one more thing. The fellow what ate at Tim's table wore kid gloves. I don't know many cowhands as owns a pair of them things, leave alone one that wears 'em."

"You might be c'rect about the gloves," replied a tall cowman named Whipple, Bill Whipple, "but listen, son. I've got the shaving paper left at the house of Sam Harris and Jed Burdock. One of these has black hair stubs in it, and the other has a kinda grayish or sandy hair. Especially, how does you account for that?"

Lone Star's strange eyes took on a vagrant glow as they centered on Bill Whipple's face. He looked surprised, perplexed.

"Maybe," he said slowly, "this thing is a little tougher than I thought it was. I'll be wanting to see them papers, podner. When can I?"

"Ride home with me and I'll fetch 'em to you."

"Some other time will do," answered Lone Star. "The rest of this day and tonight I wants to mosey around this end of the valley and see what I can find. How far is it to the first of the white sands from here?"

THE men stared at each other as though in the query lay a portent of some strange and evil character; then several looked around at the white sands.

"Just about three-quarters of a mile," answered Terry. "What makes you crave that information?"

"Because," answered Lone Star, "the underside of that red mud I found on Tim's table leg was mostly covered with a thick layer of that white sand. And that tells me that whoever wore that dobie into Tim's house first traveled some distance, afoot, over them sands."

"If that's so," said Bill Whipple, "you maybe better take a slant at the mud found in Eagle Rock and at Sam's and Jed's. I've got all three pieces and I dunno whether these carry that white grit or not. Mostly, I paid attention to the color and funny make up of that dirt. I never examined 'em for no sand."

"How about them gloves, Lone Star?" asked Terry. "That's got me buffaloed."

"I found the print of a gloved hand on several things in Tim's kitchen. And a fine glove it was, too. With a close-knit machine seam. That guy handled a dusty mason jar and left as perfect a print of that glove as if he'd had a picture taken of it. The jar was filled with black strap molasses which I figures he took for honey, and that black strap back grounded the print in fine shape."

"What makes you think it ain't somebody in this valley?" some one asked.

"Because there's been too much trouble

used to leave a set of the same signs behind at each crime. What that fellow was trying to make you-all believe was that he was coming along the white sand and not leaving a trail in the valley. He figured that you'd suspect some valley man of ducking into and out of them sands and thereby hiding his trail. You'd then suspect somebody what lived in the valley But them different kinds of whiskers, I don't like that. I thought this butcher was just a bloodthirsty hombre who really shaved after each killing; but now I'm kinda fussed. Maybe he had a purpose in giving just that impression and didn't shave none his own self."

"Well, what's it all about?" asked Whipple.

"This," answered Bill. "Pay no attention to the white sands and tomorrow let's throw out a big force of cowboys and start a roundup of all cows on this range. Maybe we'll find a few that's missing."

"Does you mean that this is the work of a rustling gang?"

"Nope, I means that we wants a check on cows, for if a gang is working in Paradise Valley it is after what Paradise's got and that's nothing else but cattle."

That reply set the men to thinking and many of them agreed with Lone Star that his surmise was as good as any other conjecture.

"How far is Eagle Rock off them white sands?" asked Lone Star.

"About two miles," replied Terry.

"And Sam Harris's place and that of Jed Burdock?"

"Sam's was around a half mile and Jed's about the same as where we stand now."

"That's the answer," replied Lone Star. "All these jobs was done on the east side of the valley so's to keep all eyes on that side. That roundup had better take place tomorrow, boys, and let's all agree to be in saddles early. Let the chuck wagons go. These can follow later in the day. What I'm after is a gang of boys combing them Ghost Mountains from one end of this valley to the other, and I wants it done, fast. I'll be with you. What outfit is that coming this way?"

"Them's Tim Cook's boys," answered Terry. "And they've been over in the hills, high up, looking for strays. Maybe they can tell us something." Lone Star's eyes once more filled with that curious vagrant glow. It was a smudgy fire, that glow, but spoke of a working mind, one filled with racing thought. He waited silently until Tim's cowboys rode up. One by one these were introduced to him. When the presentation was over he turned to the foreman, Rawhide, in charge of the band.

"RAWHIDE," he said, "didja see any signs of other gangs working up yonder?"

"No fresh sign," replied Rawhide, "but in Magpie Pass I seen a place where I figured a bunch of boys must 'a' stopped and brewed some java and stayed quite a while. And it looked to me like as if there was a right good sized bunch, too. Any of you boys been up on top, lately?"

Not a rancher there made answer.

"What's come off here?" asked Rawhide.

"Tim's been killed by the same man that butchered Sam and Ted," answered Terry. "Lone Star, here, arrived just as I reached the house. When did you see Tim last, Rawhide?"

"Day before yesterday," the foreman answered, "and he seemed worried when I told him of finding that sign in Magpie Pass. I also told him that I couldn't find them fat cattle that was on top of the range, the last I seen 'em, and this worried him, too. He told me to rake the Ghosts to the South, yesterday, and then if I didn't get no trace to come on in to the ranch. Here I am, following them orders."

"Is any other outfit up there now?" asked Lone Star.

"Not a one," answered Rawhide. "I passed five or six in the valley, but all hands was busy around the grass lands and at the home ranches. I asked particular and I got the same reply each time. Nobody is in them hills, and if you wants my reckon I tells you men is skeered to travel around this dern valley. You can't blame 'em none neither."

"I don't," remarked Lone Star. "But by this time tomorrow I think we'll have all this mystery wiped away. You boys better bury Tim and get your broncs in shape, for we're pulling a whole valley roundup tomorrow morning, early. All you men get on home and let's agree to have one man from each outfit at Magpie Pass tomorrow afternoon. There we'll have a meeting and tell what we've found out as far as each of us has gone. Break for the first and nearest hills, where cow trails lead, and work to the top feed lots. Take plenty saddle guns,

for you may be busting a few caps on your way up to timberline. Come on, Terry, I reckon you and me oughta to be getting over to your place. I needs me some sleep. Some of you boys get me a fresh bronc, will ya. I've been in the middle of mine for nearly a twelve hour stretch."

While some of the boys dug a grave others tenderly prepared Tim Cook for burial. In a few moments the old frontiersman was laid to his rest in a clump of aspen that he had loved to walk in. Then the ranchers parted.

LONE STAR had spent his time prowling around the vicinity of the home ranch while the grave was being dug, and after the body had been interred he and Terry rode toward Terry's place.

On the way Terry questioned him.

"What do you really make of these killings?" he asked.

"I'm more convinced than ever that the fella who did them was working under some kind of orders. Somebody wants to skeer you fellas and raw killings was planned and executed. But he sure was cute."

"How do you mean?"

"While I was walking around the yard I seen where he'd tip-toed to and from that board. He walked only on his toes. First, he come in by the creek. Must 'a' rode his bronc up that from somewhere near the white sands. Then he tied his pony in the creek to that pasture fence what runs across it. Along that fence he went, dropped off it on the gravel of the yard and had easy going until he got back of and in line with the kitchen window. Here there's lots of dust and he didn't want to leave no sign, so he works up to the barns and sheds, where there's plenty boot marks from Tim and his hands, gets himself a board and lays it down from some loose gravel to the tree. On this he stands and shoots Tim from there. Then he puts back the board and must 'a' circled to the bunkhouse and walked from there to the kitchen over the path all the boys uses. But he tipped off his hand by one mistake."

"How?"

"This dropped out of his pocket alongside of the pile of lumber from which he took the board."

Lone Star brought out a small piece of red mud. Terry gasped as he took the earth in his hands. Then he roused as though a sudden suggestion had visited his mind.

"There ain't no white sand in this mud," he blurted.

Lone Star Bill smiled.

"Now you've said it, old hand," he remarked. "And that you know is where he made the big mistake. Just by that one little slip he read me a whole book. I think I've got the right hunch on this baby."

"He packed in that mud somewheres about his clothes, is that what you mean, Lone Star?"

"Perzactly. And to be sure that white sand stuck to the mud he left at the place of each killing it's my guess that he packed some of that in, too. Does anything else occur to you?"

"My mind's a blank. Why he'd want to leave that mud I'm derned if I can figger out. What's your idea?"

"I won't chance answering that until after tomorrow. Let's ride to that bend in the creek. It's closest to the white sands there, ain't it?"

"Yep, but if you want to get into closer flowing water then we can drop into that creek, go down it a quarter mile and ride up a little brook what is fed by a big spring that comes out of the ground near them red pinnacle rocks which is right on the edge of the white sands."

Suiting action to the word both men rode to the creek, examined its bank for fresh horse sign, and seeing none, then proceeded to the mouth of the other water course, ascended this to its source and there, in the soft earth, made out two sets of tracks, one going into and the other out of the water. Both trails led to and from the white sands. Lone Star followed these a short way only to lose both in the silty surface of the blinding waste, that waste that reminded him so much of pure talc.

"It ain't no good riding further," offered Terry. "I've chased a bronc into them sands and have lost his sign when I wasn't more'n a few minutes back of him. And in them dunes, say, you wouldn't have a chance. Yet, to us old-timers, them white sands is like a barn yard. They's twenty men in this valley as can ride nearly a straight line through 'em."

"How you do it?" asked Lone Star. "Crawl up on a hump and take a peep at the mountains?"

"NOPE, that ain't the way. It's like this. All them swells, rolls, dunes and hillocks is formed in but one direction. The East wind does it and the direction of the sands is nearly due southwest. The wind blows the sand west, of course, but the earth slopes to the south, and so the lay of the land, and the action of the wind, forms the sand into humps facing southwest. We just sees which way the newest and freshest sand has fallen and that's southwest. That way means Paradise Valley. The opposite way is northeast. But there's one big risk of a ride in them sands, during the day. That's *going blind*. I've knowed three fellows who went blind in less'n a half day. You dasn't stare at the sand for it's like blazing glass, and you can't look at the sky for it's on fire with dancing heat devils and mirages that make you think you've gone crazy. All you can do is take a peep, once in a while, and watch your bronc's ears and neck. And don't let no man tell you that a bronc won't lose himself in there. He'll do it every time, unless he has been raised in this valley."

"How big is that stretch of sand?"

"I don't know for sure, but they're right around a hundred miles one way, by forty-five or fifty the other. Maybe that sand on an average is twenty feet deep. And all the time it is crawling just like so many worms. What the wind does is to pile it up, and then the pull of the down slope of the valley sucks it along, all the time. Let's go on back to my place. None of us boys likes these dern sands. It makes us feel spooky, is what I mean."

"Look at them ravens, Terry. Something's dead out there."

A few ravens flew into the air a short distance ahead. Then they vanished back of some dunes. The two men rode in that direction. And in a few moments stopped before the carcass of a horse. It had been dead but a few hours. Terry at once leaped to the sand and examined the brand of the animal.

"That's a Triple Bar O bronc," he announced in a peculiar tone. "And that outfit is up near Eagle Rock. And look, Lone Star, this pony was shot in the head, see?" he pointed to a small bullet hole under one of the ears.

"I reckon," said Lone Star, "that was one of the broncs that killer used in getting down here. Then he shot it hoping it would be found. What do you make of that?"

"More dust in our eyes, I reckon," answered Terry. "The son of a gun wanted us to think the Triple Bar O had a hand in Tim's death."

"That's it," said Lone Star. "Now lead me to a place where I can give you a first class exhibition of a cowboy taking a twelve-hour sleep. All I want is just some place to flop."

CHAPTER III

LONE STAR RIDES ALONE

WHEN day broke Lone Star, Terry, and Terry's cowboys were riding swiftly toward the range. On the way they fell in with other outfits all silent, all staring, all eager for some word of explanation or of suggestion from Lone Star, for during the afternoon and night just passed Bill's fame had spread until all the valley regarded him in some uncanny light. He was looked upon as a sort of leader, come from somewhere, no one knew where, to guide that valley out of its despair.

Nearing the mountains the last of the ranchers from that section joined the long string of horsemen. As far as the eye could see, north or south, small spirals of rising dust glinted in the early sun and denoted many bands of riders making for the Ghost Mountains. Lone Star was impressed with the lovely quality of that ideal cattle ground.

On the gently rolling or level land of the valley he saw many herds of cattle in small bunches, and these were mostly in fenced areas or back of a drift fence which prevented the cattle from wandering into the hills. This intrigued him.

"These valley cows," he asked, "is they kept down here, all the time?"

"No," answered Terry, "just certain months. But the better grade, all of us drives into the hills and let's them run there during the breeding season and when the grass in this section ain't right good. When the valley gets too hot we open the fences and all the cows makes for the hills. Right now only the best of our stuff is in the Ghost Mountains. We'll ship, in a few weeks, and after cutting out the beef cows we'll turn in all these scrubs and young stock from the valley."

"Then, only the best you've got is in them hills, now?"

"That's it."

Lone Star was silent, and remained pretty much that way as mile after mile slipped behind him. At last came the foothills. Then the first of the pastures, and the largest of the trees. In these little natural parks were seen some old, fat bulls, and a few cows. But, from the words he heard, Bill understood that at this particular spot there should have been many fine young fat steers and cows. The absence of this stock sent a murmur of conversation and speculation along the line.

Now the cowmen broke into smaller bands and set off along various routes. Soon Rawhide, Short Time Shorty, one of Tim Cook's best and wisest cowboys, and Milk River Tom, Shorty's pardner, Terry and Lone Star Bill were riding alone. Noon came and a tense gloom had settled upon the little band with Lone Star. As feed ground after feed ground was reached and searched and nothing but old bulls and scrub cows were found, the impression grew that some sinister reason lay back of the absence of the finer grade of stock.

Now timberline was but a short distance off and soon the men would be able to stare above the pines and sweep the treeless pastures of the high levels. If the missing cows were not in sight then they had drifted far or had been driven from that end of the range. Timberline did come, at last, and its green slopes revealed no feeding nor resting cattle.

"Boys," said Lone Star, "head for Magpie Pass and let's get there fast. I'm afraid we pulled a dumb head play in not coming here last night. Which way is the Pass?"

"Follow me," growled Shorty. "I don't know what you're thinking, cowboy, but my hunch is that the cows we had on this grass yesterday ain't nowheres near us now."

"Them's my sentiments," answered Milk River Tom. "Lone Star, I ain't a bear on this stock detective business, and I ain't a wizard at reading palms or interpreting dreams, but if cows ain't where they had oughta be I'm fortune teller enough to know that they've strayed or is stolen. And if them cows has been shunted off this good side of these hills, and right here is my best hunch, by a hard boiled and hard bottomed crew of rustlers, I've a pretty fair grade of thinking in my haid that some of us is a-going to smell powder before this man's day is done. And from now on I suggests that we rides in the timber and stays out of sight."

A rifle barked above them and a bullet whined over their heads.

"OLD buddie," laughed Shorty as he raced back of some timberline scrub pine, "you has sure got the power of revelation. Lone Star, they ain't no use to ride to Magpie Pass. Not a bit in the world. While we're doing that we're only making targets for them babies following along the top. We've got to show ourselves frequent and it's suicide for us to break up them slopes to smoke out whoever is on top. My reckon is, that the best bet would be to turn back, make for Dead Mule Pass, take what boys we have and try to hit the gang, with our cows, out on the desert."

"Explain the other side of this range to me, will ya?" asked Lone Star.

"Magpie is the only cow trail over and down the range for at least seventy-five miles. Then comes the desert. This stretches for forty or fifty miles. There's water in its heart, and on its other end are the Smoky Hills, and nothing from then on until you hits Mexico. But if we could reach Dead Mule Pass we might get out on them flats and bust up them cows, or kill off some of the thieves so's the rest would high tail it away from the herd."

"That's fool talk," chirped Rawhide. "Dead Mule Pass is twenty miles from here, is steep and narrow, and needs a lot of time to wind up and out of, and then when you gets on the far side you've got all that twenty miles to ride back to get on the trail of whatever has crossed at Magpie. What I says to do is for us all to wait until them babies leaves Magpie, and this ridge, and then hit the grit with every man in Eagle Rock and Paradise Valley, take the trail to the Smoky Mountains and do a job of Apache killing on every man we find inside them hills. Wipe 'em out, clean."

"But would that bring back a cow?" asked Shorty.

"Don't think you'll even get a look at a cow, Shorty," replied Rawhide. "I'll bet you two and half that them cows was crossing Magpie as soon as you and the rest of us loped out of the hills yesterday morning. Who's this coming this way?"

A rushing horse was heard approaching. It was coming fast through the pines. Out of these it appeared and into the view of

Lone Star and his companions. Jap Malone was riding it.

"Good Lord," he cried, "Lone Star you was sure right. A big bunch of cows had been shoved over the range. We run into sign at eleven and at noon we seen where many bunches had been driven to one holding ground. Then, evidently yesterday sometime, all them cows was shoved up and through the Pass. Bill Whipple has been fired on by men on top, and so was I. That means, what, Lone Star?"

There was something pitiful in the aspect of that rugged man, something that showed clearly the chaotic and amazed condition of his mind. That Paradise should be visited by such a wholesale band of rustlers was too much for Jap. He evinced this in the manner at which he stared into Lone Star's eyes. It was as if Lone Star Bill, by some magic, could speak a solution of the tragic happening.

"That means, Jap," answered Lone Star, "that if you boys is successful in getting over the range, today, or tomorrow, that all them cows will be rushed out of this country so fast you won't get a look at 'em; but if you'll go back, take these boys with you, and settle down to a bushwhacking warfare on the thieves up yonder, I'll ride back along this ridge and send you all the rest of the boys down thataway. Then I'll make for Dead Mule Pass and when night comes I'll work my way into the Smoky Mountains just for to see what I can see."

"But fella," cried Terry, "you'd bog down a-trying a fool thing like that. You ain't forgetting the note that never was found in Tim's shack, is you? The note he left telling you to see me or wait until he got back home? Whoever killed him took that note."

"I AIN'T forgetting that," answered Lone Star, "neither am I forgetting that I knows where that red mud come from and that whoever used it has never seen my face, least ways I don't think he has; for he didn't belong to the valley and right now is with the cows. The reason for them killings was to get these cows. And now that the trick has been turned and the fat cattle started on the move, them fellows don't give a dern what is thought back in Paradise. They've combed out the prize steers and beef cows and they're hoping to get them into Mexico with as much tallow on them as they can. You sell beef by the pound and if you boys chases them fellows you won't get what you've lost, for them rustlers will put them cows over the ground until they're somewhere safe. But if you lets them know you ain't chasing them they'll allow them cows to rest, in the Smoky Mountains, and get back somewhat of the fat the drive over the desert takes off. Meanwhile I'm romping around over yonder laying my snares and getting my ears and eyes full and waiting for a chance to throw the harpoon at the right time and in the right place. Boys, gimme direction to Mule Pass and where the water lays on the desert.

Rawhide and Terry imparted this information minutely and quickly. And during the recital Shorty dropped from his saddle and made a rough drawing in a bare spot among the trees.

"Here," he said, "is the whole thing. This is the Pass you'll ride over, here's a short cut to them big Blue Chimneys in the desert, and here's some little knolls as will guide you to the first waterhole. Squint due southeast from the last of them humps and on a direct line you'll see a big bump backed hill in the Smoky Mountains what looks like a camel. Set a trail for that hill and you'll come right into the second waterhole. From that place on you can head for that spot, see it? I've drawed a saddle in the Smokies and you can't miss it if you looks for an opening which looks just like that. Up in them hills is where they say the Mexicans and Apaches used to run their stolen broncs and cows. The Smoky Mountains ain't no white man's country and none of us boys knows a thing about them. We've some of us been in the foothills, that's all we knows. From the time you get in among them you'll have to work it alone."

"And Lone Star, sonny," spoke Terry, "hadn't you better give us somebody to write to in case you don't come back? Is they somebody back in Texas that you'd want to have told what happened to you in case something did happen?"

Lone Star smiled, a sad sort of smile. Then his genial features stiffened and a cruel, bitter light welled into his eyes and clamping lines spread down his cheeks and about his mouth. "Excuse me, boys," he said, "I wants to say a word with Terry, alone." He rode away a short distance and after him followed Terry.

"Thank you, Terry," he began, "for showing that kinda spirit, but, old podner, they ain't no kinfolks of mine, any place. My only friend where I was born, is that

fellow who Tim Cook wrote. Here's the story, get what you can out of it. My mammy died when I was a young shaver. Dad and me was trying to do the best we could on a little old to-do outfit in the west end of Tom Green County. We did pretty good, considering, and had about a thousand head of right nice cows when one day I rides back to our house and there dad was like Tim Cook was found yesterday."

"You must 'a' felt bad when you walked into Tim's house and seen what you did?"

Again that bitter smile on the youth's face. That was all. He made no reply to Terry's remark but continued his narrative.

"SOMETHING that was in my dad's house, on the floor, and other things I found out in the next two or three days, made me decide to fan the dust after the men that killed him. I thought it was grudge killing, but when I went to look for my cows all I found was some scrubs, the best beef had been stolen. I sold out what I had and took the trail of them killers. I got one, within six months; and the other I got inside a year. But the fellows I sent to prison was not the stud crickets, they was just the rustlers. But they wouldn't talk. Then I turned tracker and trailer right, and got quite a name for myself as a hunter of stock thieves. The man who sent me here was a friend of my dad's and last year I cleaned out a part of a gang near where he lived. But it was Tim Cook's letter that brought me here on the run; for in that letter I saw a chance to get the man who killed my pappy. And in Tim's house I seen the same thing I seen at my dad's."

"What," said Terry in a murmur of tone.

"That funny looking red mud. They's only one spot in all this country that that earth can be found and that is at Paint Springs near the Texas-New Mexico line. And the funny thing about that mud is that you can pack it around for months while it is as hard as brick, soak it in water and it's mud again. Terry, the man who killed these fellows in Paradise is the same as has been working over some places in Texas. He's the same one as killed my dad and I'm after him if he leads me up to the front gate of hell. And when I get him I'll bring him back to Texas and hang him, legal. That's why I can't give you no names of my folks. I ain't got any. All I've got is a big and stifling hate that sometimes, seems-like, is a-going to eat the very heart out of me. That, and a dern grudge against whatever Fate it was that stacked the cards ag'in me ever since I was a kid. Goodby, Terry, go back and keep that gang on top the divide from finding out that anybody is on its trail. Don't try to cross, just worry them, and when night comes let them slip away. Now I'm gone."

Lone Star rode off. Terry joined his companions.

"He's sure a lonesome jasper, ain't he?" spoke Shorty staring after the departing figure of Bill.

"I dunno," answered Terry, "I thinks he's traveling with the most unhealthy set of devils in the world. That boy is a-packing a hate that's been with him for years. And if I'm any good at telling men, and fighting men, then let me say that I would rather have old Nick himself after me than that Lone Star Bill Ryan."

"Who's he hating?" asked Rawhide.

"The fella who killed his pappy and left a lump of red mud at the scene of the killing," replied Terry.

As though his own words, and their ringing, fear laden echo, had awakened him with a jerking apprehension, he started after Lone Star in a rush of frenzy. Catching him as he was about to vanish into a dense thicket he said, "Boy, wash off them boots! My God, wash off them boots!"

"You feared for me, eh?"

"Can't you see that if this gang knows about that mud that you will get in dutch if you parades in on 'em with it sticking over you like so many blazing pin wheels? How come you get that stuff on you?"

"AS SOON as I received Tim Cook's letter and read what he had to say, and this friend of mine and of his, in his letter bore down on the same thing, I says to myself, 'Bill, find out who's been getting that Paint Spring's mud, recent.' So I goes up yonder and tries to pump a old Mex who lives about four miles from the Springs. But it ain't no use. The old mozo knows nothing. Then I smears my boots with that red gumbo, takes a small wad along with me and rides to Tim's place. Here's that mud, now." He exposed a lump of the clay.

"I pay attention to my hunches, Lone Star, and one of them things is screeching to me, right this minute, for you to wash off that red slime from your boots. Do it at Dead Mule Pass, there's a little spring

there, as you come into the last level." Terry pleaded.

Lone Star laughed.

"All right," he said, "I believes in hunches. Anyhow, old podner, it sounds mighty fine to hear somebody advising me to take keer of myself. Makes me feel like as if somebody cared for me, after all. *Adios, compadre.*"

"So long, Kid."

CHAPTER IV
COILS OF FATE

RIDING along, Lone Star came upon cowmen and sent them back to aid Bill Whipple and the others at Magpie Pass. Then he passed the last of the Paradise Valley cattlemen. On he worked his way up, up and up, cautiously, peering ahead as his trail forced him to cross small open places. At last he saw the slender, exposed trail which led to Dead Mule Pass.

It was a miserable path, and in places it was slippery and dangerous, for frequently it wound close to sheer drops of more than a hundred feet. He began its ascent. At the spring he washed his boots. Here he gave his bronc a long drink, dismounted, removed his saddle and eased the pony's back. Filling a canteen he saddled up, and, leading his horse, walked ahead of it down the west slope.

The western sun now appeared to tip the distant hills, and long shadows of the Smoky Mountains were beginning to touch the desert with gaunt and sombre tones. He set a course for the first waterhole and mounting started away along the level floor of the plain. Not a human being or sign of a human was in sight. All was waste and silence.

At nine o'clock he reached the first waterhole which he approached warily. Here he rested, watered his horse, bathed its face and wiped out its mouth and nostrils; laved his own face, neck and head, then selecting the course Shorty had mapped for him and fixing it in his mind from the moonlit range, he forged slowly on.

The second waterhole was reached. And just as the sun came up he stopped at the top of the first of the Smoky Mountain foothills. This place had been reached in the dark, but as daylight came Bill decided to sleep out the day in the midst of a thick growth of juniper.

And sleep was necessary to him.

During the last twenty-six hours he and his pony had traveled nearly ninety miles. After a long roll, and a drink, the pony was fed from some grain Lone Star carried on his saddle and then picketed in a deep glade of heavy rich grass. Bill threw himself upon some dry pine needles and was instantly in sleep. When he awoke the moon was up. He had slept the clock around. "Fair enough," he murmured. Lunching on some sandwiches in his saddlebags he sat and smoked and stared over the desert. Then came the sound of voices; the dissonance of a lone man singing. Singing? No! That ballad was a mockery of song.

"My heart's tonight in Texas,
Though I'm for across the sea,
For the band is playing Dixie,
And it's there I long to be.
Dad says some earl I'll marry
But you shall have my hand;
For my heart's tonight in Texas
By the silver Rio Grande."

As the verse ended a burst of profanity filled the air.

After this was heard the crunching feet of horses on gravel.

Lone Star moved along the crest of his hill and peered in the direction of the sound. In the brilliant field of moonlight, which illumined the surrounding region completely, he made out thirty or forty horses and riders. And from scraps of conversation he realized that these were the men who had held back the cowmen at Magpie Pass. Much boasting filled the air. Then one of the men walked his horse to the summit of a small knoll, and there, back of a sheltering rock, lit a small fire. It blazed for a few moments and then was extinguished. The man standing beside it kicked its embers aside, mounted his pony and rejoined his companions. With them he rode out of sight up a dry creek bed. He had sent a signal which told some outpost who he was.

"So," mused Bill, "that's the way they get in, eh? Well, I got to find me a different one." He decided that daybreak would see him riding through the hills. The rest would do his pony a lot of good, and he needed daylight for his purpose. And when the day did break he was slowly moving along the ridges, gradually working a way into the tangle of hills which rose rank on

rank in front of him. Seven or eight miles were laid in this fashion back of him; and then came a break.

OUT of the trees he saw a wide expanse of sky. Here the ridge he was on ended abruptly and a great plain, covered with cacti, greasewood and chaparral began. How was he to get into that mocking vegetation, much of which suggested the upright skeletons of human forms? Closely he scrutinized the slope to the ridge and saw a spot where by leading his bronc he could descend unseen to the plain, back of bushes and small pines.

Picking his way tediously he at length reached the flats.

Here he mounted and under cover of the desert growth went on once more. Rounding a huge *sahuaro* his pony snorted and stopped. There, immediately in the way, immobile, with its eyes fixed like beads of angry fire, its huge head held down, its tusks protruding from an ugly mouth, stood a wild boar. How vicious it looked, and how utterly fearless. Then it moved aside, grunted and walked away. In a moment a squeal was heard, then a rush of flying feet, many of these, and Lone Star smiled as he understood the boar had corraled his females and was making off ahead of him.

Scarcely had the boar and the thought of it vanished from his mind until a hawk swooped and settled on a giant cactus. Then came a small opening and here three gila monsters were seen warming themselves in the early sun. A step or two away and the pony lurched aside to avoid contact with two rattlers.

"She's sure a raw, tough old land," mused Bill as he rode on.

Then came a cry, a startled, fear racked, woman's scream. It shook and trembled in the thicket like a fearful presence. Without thought of that which might befall him Lone Star galloped ahead. A few hundred feet away he saw, in a small clearing, a woman dodging around a great clump of greasewood, away from a wild boar. Tearing this way and that, gnashing its jaws, and flecking froth over its body, the boar followed. Now it gained. Then the woman leaped and the boar crashed into the center of the brush. While the boar extricated itself, the woman darted to another greasewood.

There was no time for Bill to think, no time to wonder what would be the consequences of his act, and no time to consider what was the best thing to be done. The thought of what might happen to him never entered his mind. He was filled with concern for the woman; and destruction for the beast which was certainly closing in on her. He had seen what wild hogs could do with a single slash of those huge knife-like tusks. He'd seen a man's leg ripped to the bone from thigh to knee. Then, as he spurred his horse toward the peccari, he jerked out his rope and built a loop, whirled it twice and rising swiftly took a quick chance throw over a small creosote bush. The noose lit right. His dallies were taken and horse turned about in the same motion. He smiled as the hog bounced along back of him at the end of his lass-rope. He increased the pony's speed. The boar was now crashing along, bouncing this way and that, here striking a mass of jagged stones, there being jerked through the sharp tines of prickly pear and other cacti. At last Bill stopped his bronc and saw that the boar was nearly lifeless. He removed his rope and coiled it as he rode back to where the woman stood.

"Gracias, señor," she said greeting him.

HOW sweet she looked, that Mexican girl! And how blanched were her cheeks, beneath their golden skin. But her eyes were staring wide.

"I'm glad I came along," he answered easily. "Thery're nasty brutes, those wild hogs." His Spanish was excellent and he had chosen his words to dispel her fear.

"Señor," she answered, "you have done the *great* thing for me. You have given my life to me, but you do not know where you ride. If you go on like you are going you shall die. Turn back, turn back while you have the chance. In these hills are men who allow no travelers to enter them. He who rides in, never rides out."

"Who, señorita, said I was a traveler?"

"Are you one of *his* men?" the emphasis on the word his was so pronounced that it struck fiercely at Bill's brain.

"Whose men?"

"Spider's."

"Spider who?"

"Señor, in these Smoky Mountains there is an Americano Captain whom his fellows call The Spider. His name is Spider. Just the Spider, and these hills are the homes of his ladrones, and such rob-

bers, señor! Are you one of these? Your face, señor——"

"A face, señorita, means nothing. It is only a mask. Your face, *chiquita mia,* is like that of a school girl, and yet, who knows, you are very familiar with The Spider and his men." It was cruel. The girl dropped her eyes. Lone Star saw this involuntary gesture toward a sense of shame. And a feeling of guilt arose in him.

"I thought," she murmured in a low tone, "that you were one who did not know these hills."

"I do not," he answered, "but I have business with The Spider. Will you guide me to his place?"

"Si," she answered, the color flaming back into her face.

He removed a foot from a stirrup. "Get behind me," he smiled.

As she stepped to his bronc's side her eyes fell upon his boots.

"You wear kid, señor. Very fine boots," she toyed with the words slowly. Then she gave him a hand, stepped into the stirrup, and as he lifted her she swung gently back of him. "My own pony is but a short way off, a bit more to the left and we will come upon it. I was gathering the fruit of the sahuaro, to make some wine, when the boar attacked me. I threw the basket at him, and then you came, *mi amigo.* What is your name?"

His name? Yes, he'd have to have a name in this place. Of course. What would it be? He didn't know. Then the name of his mother's family, Leslie, suggested itself to his racing mind.

"Les Lee," he said quietly. "What's yours?"

Her arms were held loosely about him. And these seemed to press, ever so little, as though some action of the girl's mind had compelled that pressure. "Call me Billito," she said queerly. "Everybody does."

"That is a man's name, a little man's name, *chiquita.*"

"The Spider says I make him think of a little man, a kid, the famous Americano who killed twenty-one white men in fair fight and yet died at the age of twenty-one. The Americano who loved a Mexican girl and because of her was killed in a room as dark as the first night. Have you ever heard of Billy The Kid?"

Lone Star laughed.

"The Spider must have his joke, señorita," he answered squeezing, unconsciously, both her arms, as he reined his pony toward the spot where he detected another horse.

"I am not so sure it is a joke, Señor," she answered. "The Spider has no humor. And to every one he gives his own name. I have a brother with this band, a fine handsome brother, and because of him, and because he knows these hills, as he does, The Spider sees to it that no man bothers me, I come and go, and take care of The Spider's cooking and his room. Here is my horse."

SHE alighted swiftly and mounted her pony. Then she flashed a look at Lone Star's face and held his eyes in a steady stare. "I wish I could read a man's soul through his eyes," she said queerly. "If I could, I would know who and what you are, Señor."

"Is it not enough that I want to be a friend to you?"

"A friend," she answered questioningly, "what manner of friend?"

Staring into her eyes he lost all desire to jest.

"The kind of friend a fellow wants his sister to have," he replied seriously. She blushed, furiously, but still maintaining her gaze.

"Les Lee," she spoke the name slowly, "a woman knows, without knowing. So, now, I know that you are not a robber in your heart. Why I know this I cannot say. But you have a good soul, a white soul, one can see that. Has sorrow been with you, very long?"

"What makes you ask this?"

"Because you look like a man who has some great torture of mind always riding at his stirrup. You have killed a man, eh?"

"Before I answer that, Billito," his use of the word seemed to amuse her. She smiled. "I want to ask you why your brother is with this band when he has such a fine sister?"

Hoofbeats sounded off to the fore. Then a voice in Spanish.

"Billito, come here! Where are you?"

"Sssh!" warned the girl, "it is one of the lookouts. Make no attempt to talk. I will do the talking."

Then she shouted in a loud, exciting cry, "Here I am! Come this way! More to the right!"

"Have you seen a rider around here?" rang a question.

"*Si,* I am talking to an Americano. Come here."

A horseman darted up, his carbine in his hands, and the gun covered the spot where Lone Star and the girl were walking their horses.

"Who are you, hombre?" asked the man.

"Buck," answered the girl, in Spanish, "a wild boar attacked me. This gentleman roped it and saved my life. He comes to see The Spider. Will you take him back, or shall I?"

"What's your name?" asked Buck.

"He tells his business to The Spider," interrupted the girl. "If you cannot leave your post I will take the gentleman. I go there, anyhow." Buck grunted and lowered his gun. Billito moved ahead, moved with a manner of scorn in her action toward the huge hulking figure of the bandit guard. "Come on Les," she said, "we've a few hill miles to ride." Buck stared after the girl, but made no move to follow or to stop her.

When she was out of ear shot she said, "You asked me why my brother is with this band. After you have talked with The Spider and I know you better, then I shall have much to say to you. If you see the way our road winds you will know how hard our ride will be. See those hills?"

LONE STAR stared at a mass of small, mound-like hills which arose, one above the other, for several miles. He nodded that he saw the trail which appeared like a yellow gash over the barren surface of the rising land.

"All the way to the last rise that trail is very narrow and very steep. A horse is tired when it reaches the top. Over that last hill is the valley where The Spider has his nest. And it is a lovely valley. There you will find plenty sweet grass, many cows," she laughed in a silvery click, "a fine stream, and when it is hot, a long and very large cave."

"A cave through those hills?"

"Did you mean a big cave?"

"*Si,* so large and so long that a thousand cattle can go through it very quickly. See that river below us?" He turned and discerned a band of silver white glinting in the fierce light of the sun.

"Up that stream is the mouth of the cave. The members of the band use that to leave and enter the Smoky Mountains. All other riders are stopped by the guards on lookout in these hills. Men are instantly fired on who stray up this old deer trail. It was lucky for me and lucky for you, Les Lee, that I met a wild boar today."

"I think," answered Lone Star, "something bigger than either of us had a hand in that boar's crazy attack on you."

Billito did not reply, seemed lost in a confusion of mind, and staring at her hands which were folded over her saddle horn led the way on and up the trail.

When the last crest had been reached the girl stopped and allowed Lone Star to drink in the beauty of the green and lovely valley below him. The sight seemed unreal. And at it he stared until he heard the girl's command to go on and saw her winding down the slope. Half an hour later she rode up to a group of adobes and log cabins out of which came pouring a large number of vicious looking and heavily armed men. These stared at Lone Star in a silent scrutiny.

"I will leave you here," said the girl in a low tone, inaudible to those who watched at the houses, "and go to see The Spider. After telling him what you did to save my life I shall tell him that you came here to see him. It will be good or evil fortune with you, Les Lee, after that. When next you see me I will smile at you, if Spider will talk with you. If he will not I will bring with me the man you are to meet. In the few minutes that are to run until such time I advise you to remain still and talk to no one. They will pump, those men over there, but don't say a word to them." Then she dismounted and giving her pony to a youth hurried into the house. How the moments dragged for Lone Star! They seemed agonies. But soon the door opened and the girl appeared. And she did not smile.

"Les Lee," she said coldly, "put away your pony. Then come to that adobe. In a few minutes I will bring to you a man who will hear what you have to say."

Lone Star nodded understanding and rode to a corral where he unsaddled and turned his horse loose. Of a sudden he saw Terry's brand on the shoulder of the pony. He had forgotten that when he rode away from Terry's ranch that he had mounted a fresh horse; for he had left his own Texas

bred bronc with Rawhide at Tim Cook's. What was he to do now? Surely those staring, leering, suspicious bandits would examine his horse and his rigging as soon as he walked inside the adobe. Then he glowed. Good! The very thing! A rush of suggestion that was like a prompt of joy filled him with exultation.

He would tell the man Spider had detailed to question him that he had come from Texas via Paradise and that he had been in need of a fresh horse and so had used his lass rope to fill his requirements, for Lone Star knew that his only hope of getting the master mind was by joining the band. Walking to the house Billito had indicated, he pushed open its door and strode inside.

THERE sat a cadaverous looking giant of a man at a small table. His two discolored eyes were fixed upon Lone Star's face.

"Sit down," he said. Lone Star obeyed.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Les Lee."

"From where?"

"Texas."

"What do you want?"

"To see The Spider. I wants to throw in with you boys."

"Who sent you?"

"Take this to the big boss and tell him my name."

Lone Star brought out a cake of the red adobe. It was very small and crumbling, but as he laid it on the table the giant's eyes took on a curious glint. He picked up the earth and arose.

"Very well," he said. "I'll deliver this. You stay here."

As the door closed Lone Star felt his heart beat violently.

CHAPTER V

THE PEEP-HOLED HOUSE

BUT it wasn't fear so much as the suspense of the meeting and leaving the ghastly giant which had set Lone Star's heart to pounding; this, and a sudden recollection of the girl Billito.

Who was she and what was she? She was of the Spanish type, dark, with deep, black eyes; eyes that changed color as moods came to her; hair that was thick and long and black as a raven's wing. Attired as he had seen her in riding pants and short coat, he thought her more suggestive of a youth than a girl, and yet how womanly she had been in all she had said and done. But what was she? What was she doing there?

"Shucks, Lone Star, you daggoned old wart hog, what you thinking thisaway for? Why, she's gentle people. She wouldn't think nothing of a rannihan like you. Now, don't you get to hankering after her or you'll taste heart break."

The door opened and in walked Billito. She was radiant.

"Whatever did you do to Pipe Stem?" she asked.

"Pipe Stem?"

"That skinny giant that just left you."

"I gave him something to take to The Spider."

"Whatever it was it had him terribly frightened. As he passed me he said, 'Billito, go sit with that man and watch him.' "

"Where is he?"

"With The Spider. Oh, I am glad of this chance to be with you alone and I must talk, fast. No doubt you are to meet The Spider, and I think soon. In case you do, remember that you will always be watched. There are peep holes in the walls of The Spider's room which look into each room in the big house. Don't forget that, and if you do not want that man to read your soul, from the expressions on your face, don't think too much of what you would like to think. He will always be watching you, until he is satisfied. And if he gives you the test—"

"The test? What's that?"

"The test is a battle for a knife. You will find out. Don't quail before him, and don't refuse to go through with it. That is how he tries his recruits. There will be a knife and you will try to get it. But you will not be allowed, neither will the other man."

"What other man?"

"Sssh! I hear Pipe Stem. He is coming back."

She sat down opposite Lone Star. The door opened and Pipe Stem peered inside. "Follow me," was all he said as he turned away. Billito reached forward and clutched Lone Star's wrist.

"I'm your friend," she whispered in his ear. "No matter what comes, I'm your friend. I knew it in the chaparral, and I know it now. Go, and don't be afraid."

He flushed furiously as he sent her a look which said plainly that he was grateful and that he understood. Then he walked from the adobe and saw Pipe Stem waiting for him. The giant led him through a kitchen and into a large, oblong room, with benches everywhere around its walls. These were filled with sneering and scowling men. The room was low ceilinged and reeked with foul tobacco smoke.

"Stand there," said Pipe Stem.

Lone Star did as directed.

Casually, his eyes drifted about the wall which faced him, and there, just below a picture of a race horse, he thought he saw a curious glint. At this he stared. And as he looked he thought he saw an eye, and then the lid of an eye flick as it opened and closed.

That room was like a foul and evil world into which he had suddenly been plunged. It was lined, that world, with these creatures who sat like automatons along the wall benches. These beings with furtive figures, inflamed or blanched but always greasy and unclean faces, sent forth a repulsive suggestion of debauchery and utter cruelty; but they were waiting. Not a man said a word. Several of them scarcely moved, but all of them inhaled from cigarettes which hung loosely from their lips.

He sought the spot under the picture frame. Unquestionably this was an eye. The Spider's eye! And as he looked a quirk of the sunlight streaking into the room revealed a miserable filminess as though that eye were watery, or bleary. Lone Star shuddered at what he saw. Then the eye vanished and a bell tinkled somewhere. Tinkled and relieved the tension, for instantly an uproar broke loose in that room.

A man, lank, lean and lascivious looking, who had the blanched skin of one who had been dipped in a bleaching vat, jumped into the center of the room and leered into Lone Star's face.

"So, you rode in with Billito, did ya?" he screeched.

Whereupon all in the room burst into a ribald laughter. Lone Star made no comment. But he set his left foot a trifle back of his right. His tormentor approached him, came within arm's length and then once more guffawed his words in a suggestive, insulting tone. "You rode in with her, didja? And did you think she was a angel or something like that?"

Lone Star recalled Billito's words spoken to him but an instant before. "Don't quail before him and don't refuse to go through with it."

Out shot his right, its fist crashing with a sodden force into the pulpy frog-like face laughing into his, and down went the man, who had taunted him, in a crumpling heap at his feet. The jeers and laughter in the room ceased. Once more sounded the tinkle of a bell. Then Pipe Stem, who was standing behind him, said, "Boys, here's quite a hand. He's some fighter, and Frog wasn't no match for him. Who'll fight this hombre, and what will the weapons be?"

"Let Pecos take that battle out of him!" cried a man.

"How about it, Pecos?" asked Pipe Stem.

"I'll take him," answered a voice from a far corner as a perfect hulk of a human form arose and walked to the center of the room. This figure was the largest Lone Star had ever seen.

"All those in favor say 'aye,'" spoke Pipe Stem.

"Aye," rang a chorus of voices.

"Give that kid a chance! Throw out a knife, and if he can get to it let him carve Pecos down to his size," someone cried, a mocking earnest quality to his words. Pipe Stem reached to a table and tossed a twelve inch knife to the center of the room where its point struck and stuck, swaying from side to side like a wind blown weed stem. That knife had evidently been made from beaten drill-steel, hammered, filed and ground to a double edge blade. It appeared to be razor sharp. Its handle and hilt had been fashioned out of a deer's horn.

"Now," cried Pipe Stem, stepping back, "give 'em plenty room, you boys, and listen, you battlers, this scrap is of the 'go-as-you-please' order. Nothing is barred, except that if one of you knocks the other out the fight must stop. However, if one of you can get a hand on that knife you may use it so long as the other fellow is able to move and can stand on his feet. Go!"

THE door opened from the kitchen and in came Billito.

The man Lone Star had knocked down was just arising to his feet, and upon him Billito cast a jeering smile. "What's the matter with your lip?" she asked. "Did you run into something?" Everybody laughed.

"When Pecos finishes with him," said the

man, "I'll get even with that gazebo." Billito withered him with a look.

"Ain't you agoing to take off them guns and chaps?" asked Pecos of Lone Star.

Lone Star unbuckled his belt and hung his guns on the wall at the side of Billito; below his belt he placed his chaps. Then he reached down, pulled off his boots, took up a hole in his pants' belt, and stood ready, staring fearlessly into Pecos's eyes. The giant shambled toward him like a bear, and like a bear he reared himself out of a slinking position into an upright posture which made him appear even larger than before. On his face was a grin, not a vicious cruelty of expression, but a tantalizing grimace which seemed to say that he held Lone Star in utter scorn; but the next instant that leer left his lips, and a smear of rushing blood took its place. Lone Star had leaped, feinted, stepped in close, and before the monster knew what to do the boy had driven a right and left cross with terrific force into the man's mouth. The fellow grunted, placed a hand to his face, and drawing both feet together stared at Lone Star. This position was exactly what Lone Star liked. Again he lunged and this time in a circling gait, half running, half a series of side steps, but it served to confuse his antagonist. And then, leading to the jaw, as the giant threw up an arm to block the blow, Lone Star ducked and drove both hands wrist deep in the stomach of his opponent. It was a sickening thud which sounded throughout the room. And it caused the great head to flop forward and the beef shoulders to settle. Then it was that Lone Star swung a ferocious right and, aiming carefully, drove his knuckles into the man's throat directly upon the jugular. Back went the huge, lumpish head, the eyes rolled in their sockets, and the neck contorted in a series of convulsive jerkings, terrible to witness. Then, as a cat leaps on a victim, Lone Star sprang and sent his crashing left to Pecos's Adam's apple and followed this with a right upper-cut to the exact button of the chin.

But as Pecos started to fall Lone Star stooped, picked up the knife, and grasping it firmly was on the point of plunging it into Pecos's breast when Pipe Stem yelled, "Pecos is out! You can't use that knife! Take it from him, boys!" Lone Star backed suddenly and stood beneath his chaps and beside Billito. On rushed the gangsters. And up reached Lone Star's swift hands to grasp both of his guns which he swung to a line with his hips covering the men who were on the point of attacking him. In obtaining his revolvers he dropped the knife which had fallen on its point and was now swinging back and forth like some metronome of murder.

The men about to surge forward stopped as if a bar had dropped blocking their way. And into their faces flew frenzies of fear. Clearly, Lone Star dominated that room. Pipe Stem was making curious little noises through his teeth and staring at the spot beneath the lithograph of the race horse, and moving his lips in a masquerade of speech. Clearly he was asking for orders!

"Lice, cockroaches and ticks!" exclaimed Lone Star. "If you makes but one more hobble I'll have me a shambles in this room; and as long as I can work these guns I'll get me a man a shot. I come in here to meet The Spider. Which one of you is him?"

"Hang up them guns, Slim, and put on your boots," a thread of muffled tone came from behind him. "I've got you covered and you're a dead hombre if you don't do what I say, quick."

LONE STAR had been wondering how long it would be before he would hear just such a voice; but as he heard it, something prompted him to think of the hiss of a snake or the fight-screech of a hawk. He flashed a look about and saw a hideous face and a long black gun in an oblong opening which had somehow appeared under that picture.

Wordless he hung up his Colts, pulled on his boots and chaps and then stared at the place where he had seen the face. It had vanished. Not even the eye was there now. By his side he heard a swift intake of breath, then a soft silvery laughter. Billito caught his eyes. *"You,"* she said with emphasis, "you have won a place with The Spider. No other man ever whipped Pecos before. A man has come to the Smoky Mountains, at last. And, listen, boys," she laid a hand on Lone Star's shoulder, "The Spider has called him Slim. And Slim is now his name."

All this time Pecos had been slumping, staggering, catching himself, wandering in a daze, with a lurching, side-rolling gait. Now he wilted, half turned, then fell, palpitating, and quivering, flat upon his back "Throw some water on him," said Lone

Star, "and lay out his arms and legs. That last one of mine has paralyzed his throat."

As the men crowded about Pecos, Billito grasped Lone Star's fingers, interlocked these in a tight grip and squeezed them fiercely.

"Now you can see The Spider," said Pipe Stem. "He wants to meet you. And say, Slim, if you ain't too much of a dern fool, you'll have a easy berth in this outfit. What you did ain't been done before and the old man is tickled stiff. Go easy, answer questions, and don't get raw. Now come on."

Billito's fingers gripped again. Then they relaxed and she went from the room. As Pipe Stem headed for a door which opened through the same wall on which hung the picture, a young Mexican came out of the mass of men and took Lone Star's hand. "My name is Juan, Señor," he said. "I am the brother of Billito. I thank you for what you have done." Lone Star returned the pressure of Juan's handclasp.

Pipe Stem opened the door, passed through it, and after him walked Lone Star. What a sight met his eyes! Involuntarily, he halted. Involuntarily, a rush of angered emotion sent a flecking mass of black and red specks flicking before his eyes.

The first thing that had met his sight in that room was a sort of low plate-rack around a corner upon which rested many pieces of the peculiar blood red earth. And above each of these hung a piece of white paper, *bearing a number*. Quickly his eyes took in the consecutive order from one to forty-three.

Forty-three!

There could be no mistaking these symbols. Those bits of crimson clay told each of a murder. And the number above it was a cipher in some code which held the secret of each bit of the red earth and the killing it classified.

"Sit down, Slim," a voice murmured, rather musically, Lone Star thought. Then the boy switched his head and saw a man sitting back of a table. His blood seemed to congeal in his veins as he stared at the figure. "Leave us, Pipe Stem, and clear those buzzards out of the house. Get them all out, right this minute."

Pipe Stem vanished.

"I'm the one called The Spider," came that husk of sound; that tone which held that peculiar musical quality, as if in the body of that voice there was another essence of some sound which could be, instantly, metallic, like that of a file scraping on a saw-tooth, or a knife whetted against a finely surfaced stone.

LONE STAR suddenly felt oppressed, felt as if he needed the fresh air of the outside, to be alone among the trees, all alone, somewhere, under the stars. He felt like a thing about to be devoured, like a bird must feel when a snake has charmed it to that paralysis of fright which renders it numb with only enough power to flutter and quake. But from somewhere in the house came the singing voice of Billito intoning an old Valencian love song.

"Be brave, my love,
All rests with you;
The break of dawn is near.
Look up, my love,
The skies are blue
And my love waits you here."

The stimulation of that song had a galvanic effect on Lone Star, but only for an instant, for he caught the penetrating eyes of Spider upon him and recalled that the girl had warned him that Spider could read the thoughts of a man from the expressions which flitted over his face. And this Spider was the master mind whose game he would have to play in order to bring him to justice. Lone Star suddenly assumed an air as though surprised interest had jerked him momentarily from consideration of the man's presence before him.

"Hasn't she a nice voice?" asked The Spider.

"But ain't she kidding somebody? Seems to me she's too cute to have around a nest like this. Some of them babies out in that room looked funny when she came in among 'em. It's dangerous, having a girl around like her. And me, say, I don't like to work with no woman holding the cards on me. I've seen a lot of guys in 'stir' and the most of them got back of bars because all the cops had to do was to follow a calico trail. Who's gal is she?"

The Spider smirked. And as that grimace revealed itself, in all of its slow insidiousness, Lone Star analyzed and noted the features and the form of the man.

His eyes were like twin buttons of smoky topaz; and these were ever filling and bellying, emptying and loosing, a constant flow and ebb of grayish tones. And they were

set close together with a narrow curved beak of a nose between them. His forehead bulged to fuzzy grayish hair and rounded to furry eyebrows. Then a muddy-looking expanse of skin under and around his eyes and nose ended abruptly with a finely textured beard which was of the color of faded saffron mixed with strands of some ugly tawniness. His neck dropped into a misshapen chest from a formidable and outjutting chin. His back was humped and above it reared a swollen, round, protrusion of his twisted back bone. But his arms and shoulders! These were signally full of enormous power and were of extraordinary length. They crowned the suggestion that this man was the human effigy of a trap-door spider. Of that spider which is so fuzzy and crooked, which is so humped and has such a formidable beak, such piercing eyes and such outlandish arms or legs. The very flash of that comparison staggered Lone Star's mind with a surge of frightful repulsion. The Spider's grimace continued and the working eyes above it clearly broadcast that they saw how the man had disgusted the youth.

"That girl, Billito," murmured The Spider in a muffled whistle of sound back of drawn lips, "is like everything else at this place. She is mine." Then he laughed. And as the wind whistles down a chimney so rang that mirth in the room. "Perhaps she does not know," here his manner became one of jerking exultation and his voice loud and strident, "but Billito belongs to me."

A side door opened and Billito appeared. She came forward to the table, sat upon an end of it. It was obvious she had heard.

"Not to your spider's body, I don't," she smiled, "which is like that of a spider mated with a frog, but of your mind, your cunning wonderful mind, and the part of your makeup which none but me can ever see, that is where I belong. Eh, Spider?"

Lone Star turned away his face. Disgust fled over him and he clearly exhibited this intolerant state of mind.

"He! he!" gurgled The Spider. "You clever devil, Billito. We shall see, when the day comes, which of us is the most like the spider. You play for high stakes, my girl, and maybe you will win; but I deal the cards. Don't forget that."

"What will you eat, *mi capitan?*" asked the girl.

"Eggs, some cake and trout, if you have any. Milk for me. Bacon and beef for Slim and coffee, too. He eats with me, here."

"Have you thanked him for saving me from that boar?" asked Billito. "Have you told him that you were but giving him the test when you made him fight Pecos?" Don't torture him any more."

"Go away," laughed The Spider. "He has just come into the room. I'll have plenty to say to him in a little while."

"If I had my way," here Billito looked at Lone Star, "I would give Slim a champagne breakfast. He has earned it."

"I don't drink," answered Lone Star. The Spider searched the boy's face.

"Stick to that," he said, "and you'll go a long ways before they stick the black cap over your head."

"I don't do nothing," answered Lone Star, "that steals away my brain. And I never allows nobody to do nothing to me that will hem me up in a crack where I can't get out. I figgers the best way to keep your scalp is to tie your brains to it."

Billito dropped from the table and started away. The Spider called her back. He picked up a small package and handed it to her. "This come a while ago," he said, "by way of Monterey and Rio del Carmen. I told you I'd get it, and here it is, all the long road from Sanchez's shop in Mexico City."

The girl unwrapped the parcel exposing a marvelous tortoise shell back comb. In the very center of its highest point sparkled a very fine and very large diamond. Billito stuck it in her hair, bent low over The Spider and patted one of his cheeks.

Then Billito romped out of the room singing.

"She's the only woman I ever saw that I wanted," said The Spider, "and, boy, if you'll help me get what I want, so's I can take her where she belongs, you'll own all the money you'll ever need. Now let's get down to business. Where'd you get that mud?"

CHAPTER VI

DICING WITH DEATH

LONE STAR heard the words; but made no instant reply. On the contrary, he raised his eyes and let them drift from daub to daub where the grim red adobe rested on the plate rack of the wall.

"Mine were brothers to them," he said. "Paint Springs!"

"How did you know of that place?"

The query raced through the boy like a galvanic shock. What would he say? Suppose he should lie and quote a man who did not exist? Would he not be gambling with fate in such fashion? Were it not better to mention a name of a felon who was dead? Dead of consumption in a Texas prison. Was not his name known to Spider? And would the man not be startled if he told a part of the truth, and would he not believe that part? Truly he was risking his life, but what of it? He had diced with death before, he could do so again. At least he would catch and hold The Spider's eye, as he told his story, and if he saw that the man doubted him then The Spider would cease to exist. Lone Star would kill him where he sat. Twisting about he loosened his gun with the motion of his body.

"Slats Mondell was how I come to know of this mud."

"He's dead more than a year. Died a lunger, eh?"

"In a Texas prison. But Hambone Smith was his cellmate and Hambone was a friend of mine. He told me of Slat's boss who always did a killing job with a red mud decoration to it. Slats said that The Spider had been a good boss, and a square dealer. Hambone and I thought I could reach you by watching for killings with Paint Springs mud as a sign of your work."

"The funny thing is, Slim, that when Slats got snared he had lost all track of me. I quit Texas and I went it in a different way. Before, I worked with few men. Now I have many. I am good to my boys. They never leave me unless they go to the pen through some foolishness of their own. Then I never try to reach them, except to send them money."

How well Lone Star knew the man had told the truth. Slats had been one of those who had tried to sell the cattle he and his father had lost. Nothing could make the thief talk, and there was no evidence that he had had a hand in the murder of Bill's daddy. But all the years that Slats had been behind bars money had come to him regularly; yet the fellow knew nothing of those for whom he had formerly committed crime. This much he had imparted to the stool pigeon Hambone Smith who in turn had told it to the warden of the prison who had imparted it to Lone Star. Now Lone Star knew for a certainty that Slats could not have squawked, because he had known nothing to tell.

Spider's eyes were dancing. Lone Star's fingers were stealing toward his gun, for those eyes held a devil's own gleam in their working depths. An instant more and The Spider would make some sign. The room would fill with smoke and Spider would gasp out his life. But Spider's lips moved.

"No, Slim," he murmured softly, "my boys never leave me."

Comprehension came to Lone Star. And fear left him. That demoniacal light in Spider's eyes came from the effect of that phrase on his mind. *His men never left him.* Lone Star winced at the thought that went hurtling through his mind with shrieking mockery. As he culled those words he noted that The Spider's face was jerking beneath its fuzzy hair; that his lips had drawn back, and that the nostrils of his beakish nose were hardened rings of white gristle. *His men never left him,* because—

"How long did it take you to find me?"

THERE was a questioning concern, a sort of mild fear, in that question which belied its words. Spider's eyes were drinking in the face of Bill viciously, thirstily.

"I was in the pen," Lone Star answered. "Then I got out. Then I did a trick or two to get the kinks out of my legs and my feet used to boots and spurs, and then I went to Paint Springs, and then, say, Spider. what's the use? I heard of the Paradise killings and here I come, right now. I took a chance. And the Hebrews got out of Egypt by doing the same thing."

"If *you* could find me, why not somebody wearing a star?"

"But I went to Paint Springs to get some mud, for I knew that if I got near where the bosses of Slats was that that dirt would make my story sound straight. So, into Paradise I romped, landed the day after Tim Cook's killing, joined a posse on the range, stood a dog watch guard at Dead Mule Pass and when everybody was sleeping I stole a good bronc and came across the desert, bumped into Billito, she was grateful, and you know the rest. I won't spill no more of myself than you will of yours; but I'm willing to follow you and earn whatever I can."

"I've left a trail, Slim. I've slipped, somewhere. I feel it."

Click! clack!

Two pieces of hard wood stirred on the wall back of Spider. Lone Star noted a wire that led from these along the wall and out of the room to where Billito was working. He studied Spider's face.

"Jump back of that curtain, said the dwarf. Lone Star vanished, but through a rent in the cloth that screened him he watched Spider. Billito came into the room and as she entered Spider shuffled across the floor until he stood back of the door through which the girl had entered.

"Who?" he asked in a hissing query.

"Frog," she answered.

"Where?"

"He must be in the big room now."

"All right, Billito, sing!"

The room filled with the golden tones of the girl's voice. She trilled high notes, moved about in a ramping manner, and filled the air with a gladness which distracted the attention of Lone Star from the person of The Spider. When next Bill turned his eyes toward the spot where the cripple had stood the man had disappeared.

He dared not move, make a sound or sign; but there he stood, heart pounding, eyes staring, the curtain shaking with the tumultous twitching of his overstrung body, pulsing against the fabric of his screen.

"Oh, my God! Don't, Spider! Don't break my back!"

That cry of fear and pain tossed into the peace of that song laden air crashed against the fury of Lone Star's emotion like a tongue of red hot flame. But he had no time to make any effort, or for that matter, to think of a cause. On the far side of the room a door opened and in came, first, Frog, bent double, a piece of paper in one hand, his other twisted up and along his back in a ghastly hammerlock. After him strode The Spider shoving Frog along and grimacing at the suffering he was causing. When the center of the room was reached Spider released his victim.

"Spy on me, will you? Do you know what I do to your kind?"

Frog flopped into a chair dangling the wrenched arm as though to ease its pain. "God, what a devil you are," he snapped. "I was just coming to give you this—paper."

"You came to spy on me. You sneaked in. Didn't he, Billito?" Spider turned and smiled at the girl.

"You saw and I saw," she answered. "He was walking on the tips of his toes."

"I thought Slim was with you," moaned Frog. "And what I've got I do not want him to know. Read this—"

"Take it, and read it, aloud, Billito," ordered Spider. The girl snatched a small paper from Frog's fingers.

Then she seemed to wince, to sway, to fill with a sudden rush of stagnant thought as her fingers trembled and her mouth gaped. "Read," spoke Spider, and the girl read, slowly, a strange calm to her voice.

"Lone Star Bill Ryan, I'm leaving this on my table to tell you to make yourself at home in my place. I'll be back in a few days, maybe hours.

Tim Cook.

"WHERE'D you get that?" asked Spider.

"I found it on Tim Cook's table," whined Frog. "Does you know who Lone Star Bill is?"

"Never heard of him. Who is he?"

"A tracker and a trailer from West Texas. I thought you oughta have this, because, now, this Slim—why—"

"You been keeping this from me, haven't you?" Spider drew close to Frog. The wretched man writhed away clutching his hurt arm.

"I never thought of it till a while ago. Then I came to see you in a rush. Maybe this Slim—"

"Spider," cried Billito, furiously, "Frog took it on himself to insult me by joking Slim just before Slim knocked him down. Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"You can read a man's thoughts from what lies back of his eyes, can't you?"

"As if he had them written there. That is, most men."

"I have read Frog's thoughts as he looked at me. And I have caught him watching me like a cat does a bird. He's made up his mind, Spider—"

"No, no, no," yelled Frog, "not that-away. Of course I've watched you. Any man will steal a look at a pretty girl; I'm no exception, but not what you say, Billito. I swear to God that is not so. All the boys know you belong to—"

Billito laughed.

"You hate Slim, eh, Frog?" Spider toyed

with the question with an exquisite degree of subtlety.

"Hate him? Give me a chance, that's all I want," he answered. "If you want—"

"Perhaps I will be sending him and you back to Paradise," broke in Spider. "Perhaps in a few days I will ask you to take him back and leave him there. Who knows?"

The Frog roared, all thought of his fright fleeing from him at what he saw in such a prospect. "Gimme just that chance to get even for his knocking me, kicking out in that room in front of all the gang. Just that chance, and I'll be like a kid."

"All right, go! But hereafter don't carry such notes so long with you, and never come tiptoeing into this house again. Get out!" As Spider waved a hand Frog jumped from the room. When the slamming of an outer door announced his departure from the house Spider said, "Come out, Slim." Lone Star stepped from behind the curtain.

Billito stood aghast, stood breast heaving, hands clenching, a slight tremor visibly pulsing her throat. Her eyes were fixed on the boy's face; then they flashed toward the table where lay a long, thin, file-like knife, and suddenly lifted to Spider's twisting features. She calmed at the sight of these.

"I'll say this, Spider," began Lone Star, "that you give a newcomer plenty to keep him busy in this man's house. Now ain't that Frog a nice little playmate for me to romp with over that desert and into Paradise?" Spider laughed.

"What he did, just now," he roared, "finished him with me. He never would have showed that note to me unless he had wanted to kill you. Do you want to know what I think?"

LONE STAR diced with death again. and as he spoke Billito gasped audibly at the youth's bravado.

"That I'm Lone Star Ryan, eh?" came Bill's mocking tones.

"Not that, but I was thinking that Frog is hiding something, somebody. He is shielding from me something he understands as a danger to me. Somebody is alive that I think is dead. Did I not tell you that my boys never leave me?"

"I understood you, too."

"One has. And I believe that Frog helped him make his escape. They are fixing to snare me, boy. Billito, where are those reports on the Paradise killings?"

Billito opened a drawer and brought out a package of what looked like letters. There were at least ten of these. She gave the bundle to Spider who examined each one with a quick glance. "There's nothing to show in any of these what I now feel to be proof of my hunch. Somebody has lied. Many have lied. The one who wrote these has lied. Facts are kept from me. I'm cornered, maybe."

"I heard something about them killings," said Lone Star. "What is it you want to know?"

"Details! What was done at each place. What the spot looked like; what was discovered; what sign was left; what the people thought; what the killer did before and after each job. The men who did each of those jobs," Spider lifted an eyebrow to the plate rack, "always brought me a piece of the same mud which was left at the scene of the killing; but some of these men did other things. As a man walks, or talks, plays, works, lifts a cup or handles a gun, he follows a peculiarity all his own. I knew some of these tricks of each man's work. But in these letters I find only that red mud had been left in such and such a manner at the place where each trick had been turned; that was all. I was satisfied until Frog brought in that letter. Now I know I'm being doublecrossed by Frog and doublecrossed by the man who always reported to me what the John Laws of this state and Texas had as evidence of Paint Springs jobs. Tell me what you found out in Paradise."

Something Lone Star saw working in Billito's eyes gave a sudden flash of understanding and keyed his courage highly. He said in a calm voice: "They told me that at each killing the fellow who done the job ate fried eggs and gulped a lot of mesquite honey." Spider wove his miserable body in a series of circular jerks. His eyes seemed to pop from their sockets.

"Mesquite honey, did you say?" he whispered.

"Yes, a pound at a time. And then, here's something. At Tim Cook's they said the print of fine kid gloves was found on a dusty molasses jar."

Spider reeled to the table and fell against it. His teeth ground and gnashed horribly, his face became purple and a spot in it went in and out like a small balloon being inflated and deflated.

"That's what I wanted!" he cried, a fury taking the place of the fear which had at that instant possessed him. "The Hawk lives! The Hawk is alive and is watching, and waiting. I've slipped, Slim. And I still feel myself slipping. Kid gloves! Honey! My God!"

"The Hawk!" How Lone Star lashed out with that query. It amounted almost to a command for Spider to speak.

"Yes, the Hawk, the dirtiest rat that ever walked upright like a man. Before Frog was," again the eyebrow lifted toward the red-mud on the rack, "the Hawk was. He did them, and them," a bony finger pointed to parts of the crimson earth and signalled these out from the others as though the digit had touched each piece of the blood colored clay. "I knew him for what he was. I gave Frog his chance, as I am about to give you your chance. I sent him riding with the Hawk. And he came back —came back, mind you"—Spider shrieked the words in a high squeaky voice—"and told me that Hawk lay beside a bit of that mud. Then the fellow who wrote these sent me word to the same effect." A hand lifted the pile of letters from the table. "He's a lawyer in El Paso."

"Calm yourself, *mi capitan,*" soothed the girl. "Remember you have a mind. These others, these animal ones, they are beasts. You are a man, snake heart, full of brains, and you have power. Don't forget that. You have power, because you use your head."

THE effect of those words on Spider was like a sedative. He literally dropped into an immobility of posture, mood and mien which struck Lone Star as marvelous. The spidery eyes sought the face of the girl and roved it with a repulsive tenderness.

"Thank you, Billito, *querida mia,*" he droned. "You gave me courage when I needed it. But how about him? Him! This slat built Slim who stands there grinning at me."

"What does a woman say of a man who has given her back her life? Does she speak ill words? Spider, you are in many ways a man gifted with the power of seeing unseen things; but in some ways you are as a child who does not know, and never can understand, until its fingers touch that which is the unknown. Did not Slim fight, in that room? Did he not get by all the eagle eyes of your guards? Did he not show the brave thing when he came here, alone? And did he not do the very thing you have always told me your other men lacked?"

"What was that?"

"Did he not hide from your eyes his thoughts when you saw him first in that test-room? Why ask my opinion when your own heart and your head have already told you? I have eyes, Spider, I know what you think, now. I have looked into Slim's eyes, too."

Out came one of the huge hands, its pincher-like fingers opening as tentacles open, until they felt the grip of Lone Star's fingers and then they closed like feelers in a long flexible movement which almost crushed the bones in the boy's hand.

"She has said it, Slim," snapped Spider, a crack of finality to his words. "And with this hand shake, you and I start from right now. I want you to get the Frog and get Hawk."

Removing his hands and flexing his fingers Lone Star fixed The Spider with a steadfast stare. "Don't worry," he said. "What's now and next to do? Lone Star was pleased he could now await his chance to get The Spider. In the meantime, he would follow his lead.

The escaping breath from Billito's lungs told of a sigh of sudden peace which had left her like an involuntary cry of pain. Then she placed an arm around the shoulders of each of the men. "That's it," she joyed. "Worry is a horse that always packs its rider into quicksands."

"What work must I do now?" asked the dwarf. "You have an idea back of those flashing eyes. Out with it, my dear."

"The one who brought the comb from out of Mexico also brought mail, *mi capitan,* eh?" Billito asked curiously. That pretty comb from the shop of Sanchez was carried in a sack with mail for the boys. And mail for you, too. My brother Juan is riding hard because of some mail which you received; but how about this letter?" she picked up the note left by Tim Cook. "Do you know whether it came with that rider from the Rio del Carmen by relay? Or did Frog really have it all this time?"

"I'll find out," hissed Spider. "I'll find out, now."

"How child-like you are. I tell you something and you want to throw caution to the wind. Do nothing rash, but let me worm out of this Mexican what letters he

brought to your men. Is not that the better way?"

Spider smiled.

"In a woman's way a man knows nothing, Slim," he said. "Go, Billito, and find out what you can. I will wait."

She started away. Spider called her back.

"Have your pony and Slim's saddled and led to the side of this house. Tell no one. Then find out who got the mail and bring me the word."

"Why do you want my pony saddled?" asked Billito.

"Because I want you to show Slim the cave. And I want him to meet Yellow Eye." The girl gasped.

"Very well," she answered, turning and walking from the room.

"The cave," mused Lone Star. Billito alone with him—and Yellow Eye!

Fearful lest the flood of tender emotion which was surging through him should betray his state of mind to the monster at his side, who was wheezing with a flux of feelings, Lone Star broke into a low chuckle. A click of a laugh it was, sinister, almost sheer animalism.

"This will fatten your bile, Spider," he snapped. "They's something else was found at them Paradise killings. I didn't tell you in front of Billito, but I think you had ought to know. They was shaving papers left at each place and razors and mugs with stale lather in 'em. Always did the butcher shave with the dead man's outfit. He shaved, but them wise birds over in that valley are hep to him. He shaved and he didn't shave."

The wheeze had now changed to a series of gulps audible throughout the length of the room. "What do you mean, Slim?"

"Each lather covered paper was filled with different kinds of whiskers. What sign was that?"

"The Lizard's mark, Slim. The first killer I had. The Lizard! God, boy, they are *all* alive. Nobody knows these signs but me. Nobody would have left all of them at each place. The Lizard, the Hawk, and Frog are working together. And they are kidding me, each playing the other man's game."

"The Lizard was the first?" asked Lone Star, his eyes telling of a horrible suggestion.

"Yes, the first. I worked him in Texas, for he was fast, smart and sober. He taught me much; but he wanted to rule in my place. I sent the Hawk to kill him."

"Did he know Slats Mondell?"

"He did the job we pulled before Slats was caught."

How Lone Star's brain reeled! This man, The Lizard, fired the gun which had killed Lone Star's father. The boy's face writhed.

"And this Lizard always shaved, did he, after each killing?"

"No," yelled Spider, "he didn't shave because he couldn't shave. His face was without hair, like his head and his body. Yellow fever, they said it was, but I think it was some kind of rot that was always eating at him. He looked and acted like a greasy, hairless lizard. But to throw off suspicion he carried lather covered paper with him, used the dead man's shaving tools and left his own lather. This he took from some one whom he saw shave. After a few times he told me of this sign and he saw to it that I always heard of such evidence at each killing he did. My mark was the Paint Springs mud. His was the shaving paper.

"And the Hawk's was honey and eggs and them gloves, eh?"

"NOW you have it. Mesquite honey, eggs and not a finger print ever showing any place where he worked. I tell you, Slim, we're up against a clever brain."

"You figure on them turning you up?"

"No. I figure on them killing me and taking what I got. Look at this country. Bigger than some states back east, it hasn't a law officer in it for a hundred miles in any direction. The Indians are my friends, and the border is not far. Here, in this valley, I am as safe as if I had the army behind me. I can see whoever comes for hours before they get here. What chance would a sheriff have of taking me? You can bank on it, the Lizard, the Hawk and Frog are making a deadfall and will try to catch me in it. But they won't! They won't! I told you my men never leave me, and this time they won't. When the time comes, you and Billito and I will ride away, alone!" He fell to whimpering like a small dog. After a while Billito came.

"The Monterey rider who brought the mail and my comb is now talking with Frog. Talking low and under the pepper trees near the spring house; but he did bring a letter to Frog. Buck saw him slip one to him."

"That is good. I will talk with him. He

is Pedro, ain't he?" Spider's face was now thoroughly calm. Its bewitching had ceased.

"Yes. And he is going to sleep in that little room in this house, off the kitchen."

"He is?" returned Spider. "He will go to sleep in this room, first. After he has told me certain things."

"Billito," said Lone Star, "as I came into this room your brother Juan shook my hand and thanked me for defending your name. A while ago you said he was riding because of something Spider received in the mail. What did you mean?"

Spider smiled.

"I have sent him on an errand," he said. "Before this time tomorrow he will be two hundred miles into Mexico. He goes by fast horses and will change every fifteen miles. Don't ask questions, Slim. You and Billito go eat. I have lost my appetite. Go, both of you. And when you have finished, *querida mia,* send Pedro in to me. When he comes, and you hear my bell, you and Slim ride off to the cave and to Yellow Eye. But be back, if you can, before sundown."

The gesture with which he waved them from the room had something imperial in it. Lone Star, back of the door, grasped Billito's hand and whispered into her ear.

"You know who I am, I saw it in your face as you read that note. Won't you tell me why you shielded me?"

"When we are riding I will tell you," she said.

CHAPTER VII

THE NET IS SET

BUT Lone Star did not wait until he was in the saddle.

It was while he ate that he learned from the eyes and the murmured words of Billito that from the first she had taken him for an enemy to The Spider. But when she had read the note Frog had carried into the house she had nearly fainted with the rush of conviction that had flooded her.

As she talked, head bent, her speech carrying only across the end of the table, a wisp of sound struggled into the room.

Thud! Some object fell. Or a blow had been struck.

Lone Star dropped his fork. Billito ceased to speak.

Thud!

"What's that?"

"I don't know," replied Billito. "I never heard it before."

Thud!

It sounded from the floor, or was it the walls?

"Is it him, Spider?"

"No. I have loosened a board in the floor of the hall which leads from his room to this. Whenever he comes this way I know of his approach. This sound is like that made by a—"

"Señorita, may I go to sleep in my room?"

Pedro, the mail rider, appeared in the door which led from the outside. His sudden appearance startled Lone Star and the girl.

"Spider wants to speak to you in his room there," answered Billito. "Be careful, for he is angry. Don't cross him."

Pedro moved across the floor stealthily, and his tread was like that of one walking to his doom. In his eyes there lay a haunted look; and upon his face was spreading the blanched hue of fear. "You think he is angry with me?" he asked swinging about.

Billito gazed at the man in a pitying manner. Pedro hesitated, strode forward, went through a door, closed it easily and they heard him walking along the hall. Then a board creaked loudly. "That's the board," whispered Billito. "I always know when Spider is coming because of that."

Thud! thud! thud! thud!

The sounds came quickly in a rapid series of blow-like echoes. Lone Star stared about him, quickly, estimating, as it were, the construction of the house.

"It isn't *him,*" murmured Billito. "He couldn't get into this part of the house, except—"

There came a screaming cry ringing out of The Spider's room. It was the voice of Pedro. After this shriek of agony came the lone word, "Don't!" Then a momentary silence. Once more a cry, but this time it was not the voice of Pedro, but the horrible squealing screech of The Spider. The listening couple realized fear in that discord. The board sounded its alarm. Footsteps were heard. The door opened and in rushed Pedro, his face a vision of horror, his lips white dry rings above bared teeth. To Billito he ran and extending his shaking hands said in a tumult of speech, "In there, just now, The Spider is like a mad dog."

"Calm yourself, Pedro; tell me what has happened."

"Señorita, I do not know. I stepped into his room. He was waiting for me, a long knife in his hand, just in front of the door, or behind it. He closed that door. And he came at me, slowly, a wild look in his eyes and he was not saying a word. I cried, 'Don't,' and then his eyes left my face, and stared at something back of me. I know that trick. I have practised it myself. It is the one you use to turn the eyes of a man away from you when you are about to throw your knife. So I did not take my eyes from his face, and then—Oh, mother of God! I saw such a sight as I never expect to see on earth again. I saw The Spider's face turn purple, his neck blow out like a puffer pigeon, his lips went in, and then his eyes bulged and rolled back in their sockets until only the whites showed. He tottered toward me, half spun on a heel and began to drop to the floor. And as he fell a froth came out of his lips, and small gurgles of sound echoed in his throat. He hit the floor with a shoulder, turned over on his back, I came here. The man is bewitched by Satan, Señorita. And before he comes out of that fit I will be riding. I am dead on my feet, but now I ride away. Help me, will you?"

"What do you want?"

"Don't let them stop me. If anyone asks you anything—"

"Come on," said Lone Star, "let's go see."

As he stood away from the table Pedro sprang from the room.

WITH Billito back of him, Lone Star hurried to the den of The Spider. The man was rolling on the floor, groans were issuing from his lips, his legs were drawn in a miserable contortion and his arms were working, fingers clutching at his throat. If ever a man resembled a tarantula, Spider at that instant was such a being. The sight numbed Lone Star and stunned Billito. Then Spider stilled, his legs and arms sank into a repose, his eyes opened and a simple serenity spread over his face. Lone Star reached a hand and Spider grasped it. Bill pulled the man to his feet. "What's wrong, old-timer?" he asked. Spider jerked about his head and stared at the wall back of him.

"I saw," he began. Then he ceased to speak. "Where's Pedro?"

"He is frightened, Spider," said Lone Star, "and I reckon he's craving distance, by this time. He passed me doing nothing flat. He said you saw something and dropped before you could use your knife on him."

Spider was as one who had not heard. Then he mumbled. "All right, let him go! Poor devil, he isn't the one."

"What one?" asked Lone Star. But Spider made no reply. Instead he strode toward what appeared like a walled up window in the side of the room. He slid back some heavy bolts, jerked at a great knob and swung a huge oaken door wide. Swung? No, it pivoted; for it was hung on two pieces of inch iron imbedded in its center. And as it turned Lone Star saw that it was the thickness of the adobe wall; which meant two bricks of the sun-dried earth, each eighteen inches wide, thirty-six inches in all. The door was huge. Opened, it exposed a space nearly six feet one way by six feet six the other, through which Lone Star saw an inner room. The wall spaces where the door fitted were sealed with iron-studded pieces of surfaced oak. So snug was that job of door hanging that hardly a scratch marred the surface of the frame. Lone Star wondered. Then Spider slid back a small panel in the door itself and peered within the space exposed. Walking around to the other side of the door he did the same thing again. Lone Star now realized that the door included twin panels which could be operated from either side. The space contained within the boxed spaces of these, inside of the door, was also of polished oak. At this Spider stared in a thick and silent scrutiny. Then he swung the door in place.

"I think," he said, "both of you have discovered my secret. I am an epileptic. But I would have sworn that as I was about to put the fear of God in Pedro that I saw this panel slide back and a long, skinny hand, with bony fingers gripping a piece of Paint Springs mud appear. And I also saw a face. Then, you know—I knew nothing. When these fits hit me they come with a rush—" He smiled at Billito, but broke off speech as if what he had been about to say had somehow shamed him.

"Is there anything I can do, *mi capitan?*" she asked sweetly. Somehow she seemed sorry for the first time for this beast. Epilepsy! The falling sickness. To the people of Mexico this dreadful malady

rather sets its victims apart as objects of charitable pity; it places them in such position that others regard them as individuals in the grip of the Prince of Darkness. Billito had now fallen under the spell of her youthful memories. The Spider was a being to be shunned, and to be pitied. But Lone Star saw his chance.

"I THINK, Spider, if I was you that I'd come along with Billito and me. You need the air." This acted like a tonic to the man.

"No," he said. "I've a lot of things to do. Go and ride and you, Billito, bring Yellow Eye back with you. If I am to have these fits again, and I thought I had rid myself of them, I want to work fast. One might hit me when I needed all my brains the most. Go on out, you two, and get into the sun."

In the shadow smile he turned on them lay the ghost of a fine spirit which fathered it. As the puncher and the girl turned away Spider dropped to his chair behind the table. Billito closed the door, leaving him alone. But as she and Lone Star came into the rear room and closed its door there struggled out of the air the merest whisper of a high, strident, chuckling mirth. They looked at each other. "Now *he's* laughing," whispered Lone Star.

"That isn't *his* laugh," replied Billito.

Clippety clop! Clippety clop!

A hurry of hoofs rang into the room. Young man and girl stared out of a window and saw Pedro galloping off to the south, his serape fluttering in the wind back of him, his face shining like burnished copper and highlighted by his exposed white teeth as he stared toward the house from under his wide black hat.

"The devil's on his tail," said Lone Star. "Let's get away from here, fast. Where are the horses?"

Thud! thud! kaplunk!

"He! he! eeeiiii!"

The laughter was sounding again. And as it rang it was interspersed with that weird *thud! kaplunk! thud! kaplunk!* that was as full of ghastly suggestions as ghostly hilarity. Then the creak of the board was heard. The Spider was coming through the hall.

"I believe it's a trick," whispered Lone Star, "and if he asks us anything let on that we have heard nothing. Don't let him see that he has us frightened." The door knob turned, slowly; the door opened an inch at a time, the eyes of Spider showed, and then he stuck his face into the crack made by the opening door.

"Who's laughing?" he asked. "Are you laughing at me?"

"I don't hear anybody," answered Lone Star.

"Go back, *mi capitan,* and rest a little. You look tired."

Indeed a haunting exhaustion did fill Spider's face. He closed the door and they heard the board as he went to his room. Then the boom of the door to his den as he closed this too.

"He! he! eeeiiii!" rang the laughter again.

"In the name of God, let us ride away from this awful place," Billito said, as she picked up her hat and gloves and started for the door. In a moment they were in their saddles riding swiftly out of the yard. And as Lone Star jogged by the girl's side he took a swift survey of The Spider's premises. The main house he saw was of pure adobe wall construction following a combination of Spanish and Indian design. It squatted in enormous lines with a heavy suggestion of massiveness.

Back of the main house and at a far side to the bunkhouses of the men were mounds of earth which told of dairy, potato cellars and root pits. Bushes appeared about the base of the main building's walls which were covered with flowering vines. The roof was nearly flat and the twigs and limbs and poles which formed its joists protruded beyond the outer edges of the walls giving a curious appearance to the top of the adobe.

But the thing which struck Lone Star the strongest was the suggestion of Spider's cleverness in building his house exactly where and as he did. Really it was a citadel whose great walls could withstand anything but cannon fire and whose windows and roof slits would afford loop hole advantages in case of a siege. A small fountain in the patio told of water which bubbled from the earth within the area covered by the house. Truly a keen sense of admiration welled up in Lone Star for the monster who had designed and executed that place. But the low voice of Billito speaking at his side jerked him out of his speculative reverie.

"That place," she said, "is monstrous. I always feel relieved when I am out of its

evil walls. If Yellow Eye is not in the river, or I can persuade him to allow me to go into the Sound Trap we will risk an attempt at escape, Bill. I feel a portent. Something tells me to leave and go to Mexico and I want you to go with me. We will ride, overtake Juan before he begins his return and compel him to stay with us. Then we can collect Mexican and American officers and capture this man and his band."

But Lone Star wasn't thinking of escape. Sound Trap!

What was that? A look at her face told him of the awe which had filled her mind.

"All right, little *querida,*" he said. She gazed at him out of eyes from which fear was fleeing. She smiled and he knew that the term, "*querida*" had surprised her; for it meant in her tongue "my dear," and in some sense "my darling."

You used that because you think I am very young and very womanish in my fears, eh, Lone Star?"

Bill was confused. "It came out before I realized it," he answered. "You've got to make allowances for me. I've been through a great deal, little girl, and you are my only companion, the only one I can turn to in my thoughts or in my talk. But tell me, what is the Sound Trap?"

"Where the cave issues into the river there are mighty hills which drop from great heights down sheer cliffs to the water. In one place, a bit below the mouth of the cave, a widening in the river forms a great bowl in the mountains. Here a gun can be fired and no sound of it heard outside of that bowl. This place is called the Sound Trap. Noise cannot enter or escape from that place. The Indians are fearful of it and call it the spot where an old chief was struck dumb by the Great Spirit because he turned coward."

"Who is Yellow Eye?"

"The leader of the Apaches, who are in league with The Spider."

"Billito, I speak Apache. Maybe I could talk with—"

"No, no, no," she spoke quickly. "Make no attempt. This Yellow Eye is clever and he is a slave to The Spider. But for some reason Spider wants you to be seen by this Apache. I think you will be used on the business for which Juan has gone to Mexico."

"What is that?"

"I don't know; but it is evil. Oh, Lone Star Bill Ryan, my brother is under the power of this Spider. He is as putty in that man's hands. And because he is here, I am here. Trying to save him, and I am filled with despair. I love Juan. I think at heart he is good, but this Spider has bewitched him and in the end will kill him. I know it, but I cannot make my brother understand. He left me hurriedly and only said that he was riding fast to Mexico to close a deal with smugglers who are coming into the Indian country to trade with the Apaches and the Navajos. I fear—"

"Yes, go on."

"I fear that Juan is leading those Mexican men into a snare that has been laid by Spider. I believe that you will be asked to lead the Indians in an ambush that will kill every smuggler."

THEY rounded a small hill and jogged across a flat. A sheer rock wall appeared before them and at its base a mass of dense growth. Into this Billito stepped her pony. The bushes ceased and a great black opening appeared. The cave! Billito entered and Lone Star followed. How long they were in it or how far they traveled he did not know; for entering it the girl told him they were not to talk. At last a speck of light appeared; it grew and widened and then came the sound of rushing water. Almost blind they rode into the sunlight to behold a group of semi nude savages standing in a circle staring upon the earth. One looked up as the sound of the walking ponies was heard. "How," he greeted.

"How," replied Billito. "We come to see Yellow Eye." The Indians parted exposing the form of a man lying upon the ground. The girl gave vent to a stifled cry of surprise. There, on the earth, the magnificent figure of an Indian brave lay. His head had fallen sidewise in a great pool of blood, a small hole near his left temple.

"This morning," said one of the Apaches, "we left the cave to go for fresh meat. Yellow Eye alone stood guard. When we returned we found him as he is now. Some bullet from there," he pointed to a wide opening down the river, "was fired at him and he dropped as he lays now."

"We shall investigate," said Lone Star in Spanish.

"Perhaps we could find some hint as to the one who did this," suggested Billito.

"No," replied the Indian. "No one goes

down that river but The Spider or one who carries the word of The Spider that we are to allow that one to pass. Yellow Eye told us that. Yellow Eye is dead. The Apache obeys Yellow Eye. Ride back and tell The Spider that his Apache brothers are at the river end of the cave and will wait until he sends them word. We have sent for the squaws and children of Yellow Eye. When they come we shall carry him back and bury him with his people. Go! I have spoken!"

Billito, blanched, trembling, staring at the dead warrior turned about her pony and headed it into the cave. Silently they passed through that moist, gloomy darkness; but when they issued into the sunlight of the valley Billito said, "Later, today, I will get permission to ride to the sahuaro patch. And if there are not too many guards out that way we can escape. But now let us be brave. God would not joke with a youth and a girl in such a way. He would not save me from the boar to allow Spider to deal me what he intends to make me suffer."

Lone Star ground his teeth in the fury of his milling thoughts.

Then he filled with a sudden rush of hope.

Terry! Whipple! Rawhide! The men from Paradise and Eagle Rock!

Perhaps they had disobeyed him and had sent a pursuing force after the outlaws and had tracked them up the river. He stared about the valley. Had such a posse issued from the cave it would have been seen. No one could travel that flat, green pastured bottom without some of the boys at the house catching sight of him. Then he surged once more. Were Paradise men in that valley, now?

While he and Pecos had fought, all the men had been inside of the house. Some thirty minutes had elapsed during this time. That would have been enough to travel to the willows along the creek and up this to the sheltered screen of the pines in the hills! He swept the horizon involuntarily. But even as he looked his heart sank. He knew the hope was the futile suggestion of an excited mind.

AT LAST they came to the house of The Spider. Beside it they dismounted and hurried into Spider's room. He sat back of his table, an anxious look in his eyes. "Back so soon?" he asked. "Why?"

"Spider, Yellow Eye is dead. He was killed by a shot fired at him from some one standing in the river where it runs through the Sound Trap," announced Billito.

"What? Yellow Eye dead?" Spider screeched the words.

"Yes, dead. He sent his men to kill game and while he was standing guard alone somebody sent a bullet into his brain."

"Then it was true," yelled Spider. "It wasn't a fit! It was him! He's here, somewhere. Now."

"Who?" asked Lone Star.

"The Lizard," answered Spider rushing to the great door and swinging it wide. He searched it everywhere. Then he returned to his chair and sat with sweaty beads forming on his brow. From somewhere came the muffled sound of hideous laughter.

"Hear that?" cried Spider. "That's him, now!"

Billito looked on the verge of a swoon. She was about to speak when Lone Star smiled and said casually in answer to an overpowering suggestion, "Hear what? Spider, old podner, you better go and take a sleep. You're all nerves and you'll break if you don't get some rest."

"Swing that door shut!" yelled Spider. "Slim, swing that door shut! And you, Billito, get me a bottle of brandy. I think Slim is right. My nerves are gone."

As Lone Star laid a hand on the massive door and it closed with an ease which amazed him, he filled with surprise at the apparent perfection of its balance. It worked like a delicate piece of finely made machinery. As he shot its bolt he turned and saw that Billito was leaving the room.

Spider had swung about in his chair and was audibly counting the pieces of red clay which rested on the plate rack on the wall.

CHAPTER VIII
FROG'S CUNNING

SEVERAL days elapsed. And what days! Every moment, of every hour, keyed the denizens of The Spider's retreat to a higher pitch of nervousness. Calamity seemed to be in the air, and while none but Billito and Lone Star apparently knew of that which was occurring in the large adobe, the rest of the crew seemed to

feel that Spider was not himself. Already there had been several fights. One man had been knifed over a card game; another had been struck with a single tree up at the harness shed where saddle repair was going on. Men formed into small groups, and these conferred with others, until the bandits were split in two camps. One, which was the larger, desired to invade Spider's privacy and demand of him his reason for ignoring them; for he had not spoken to a man outside of his house since he had heard of Yellow Eye's killing. The other faction wanted to take charge of all stolen stock in the valley and shove it out and into Mexico.

Lone Star had been seen riding away toward the cave. He had carried a written message from The Spider to Claw, the second in command of the Apaches, which was an order for the Indians to remain on guard until further notice and to allow no one to enter or to leave the valley by way of the cave and river. When Lone Star had returned from this mission Pipe Stem had started to interview him; but the boy evaded the bandit and shouting at a Mexican to take his horse had gone directly into Spider's presence. The outer guards in the hills were under Pipe Stem's personal charge and these were chosen men, old men, men on whom Pipe Stem knew he could depend. But how long? He did not know. That was what troubled him.

Idleness, silence, no contact with the master mind of the organization were the factors which were breeding rebellion outside of The Spider's house. Why had Juan ridden away so fast? Toward Mexico, too! Why had Pedro gone to his bed dog-tired and utterly wild for sleep, to stagger out of the big adobe, race for a fresh horse, then speechlessly, his face twitching, dart away furiously without even saying where he was going? And he, too, had headed for Mexico! What had come over The Spider since the arrival of the new hand Slim? And who was this hombre, anyhow? What kind of a man was he who could slap Pecos asleep and never allow the giant to lay a hand on him? And why had The Spider closeted himself with that fellow and from that time had talked with none of his boys?

Then came an Apache to the cook house for beans. This Indian told the cook that Yellow Eye had been killed. That was all he had said. None of the boys knew more than this. Some one had ridden to the cave but had not been allowed, by the Apaches, to descend the river or leave the caveside of the stream. Why?

And all the time Frog, the silent one, Frog, whom every man loathed, moved among his fellows in a mysterious manner, a wan smile on his lips, staring into all faces, yet never saying a word. The hearts of those vicious men grew tempestuous under the goad of their curiosity. The breaking point was not far distant. One morning Frog had said to Pecos, "Spider told me, the last I seen of him, that he was going to send me back to Paradise and that he'd let that slat-built Slim go along. That means that Spider wants him drilled. And when I salivate him I'll clean up your grudge and mine, too. God, how that hombre can hit. He's got a wallop like the kick of any army mule."

"You'll have to get him while he sleeps," snarled Pecos. "Or sugar his java with arsenic; for that kid's as far above you, fists, gun or grit, anyways you wants to grade him, as grama grass is above hell."

"Are you a-loving him, after what he done to you. Does you like a man to make a monkey outa you?"

"Listen, Frog, I likes a man whenever I sees one. The fact of the matter is that you ain't hating Slim so much for being what he is, as you are despising yourself for being everything he ain't. You're just a rannihan and he's top-style, all ways, and always. That's what's the matter with you and me and these boys. We're runt stock, shoddy, nickle-plated made-believes. Outside of The Spider there ain't a good thief or two dollars' worth of guts back of any gun that this outfit carries. Take it from me I ain't got a thing ag'in that Slim noways."

"There he is standing in the window now. Blow him a kiss."

Pecos spun about, caught Lone Star's eyes on his face, and then he smiled. Slowly at first. Lone Star answered that smile; then he nodded. In a few seconds he appeared in the kitchen door.

THE rancour in Frog boiled over, a diabolical idea smashed into his consciousness. Good! He'd try it. But he'd need time, and he'd need some of the Mexicans. Pecos wouldn't stand for it a minute. But had not The Spider said he could take Slim back to Paradise? Why

not do the trick, right there, and right now? He would.

"Pecos," cried Lone Star, "that don't go what I done in this house when you and I battled. That was a side of me that don't spell nothing, right. I'm for you, bigger'n a tombstone running ag'in a field of barley."

"You're jake, cowboy. I've got the right scald on you. I long ago found out that the greatest sucker pastime in the world is recollecting past times. I and you understands one another. Both of us is awake all over, eh?"

Lone Star waved a hand that Pecos accepted as a token of an understanding between them. It was only a gesture, but it came, from a man, to a man. Pecos whistled as he walked away from Frog.

Frog moved toward the main house as Pecos went to the bunkhouse. Lone Star was about to step back when he saw the eyes of Frog meeting his own. He stopped as though in answer to that stare. Frog approached him.

"Slim," he said, "if what you did to Pecos was just a sorta playing game, what I said to you was all fun, too. I s'pose you know Spider's test of a new boy, by this time. Let's forget it. Will ya?"

What condition was this? What was back of this move of Frog's? Had he seen The Spider when Lone Star had gone to carry the note to Claw? Should he scorn Frog?

These questions clicked in order through the boy's mind. No, play the game! Do not let him know that he had heard what Frog had said when he had come bearing the Tim Cook note to The Spider. He would meet cunning with cunning; match play with play. His face broke into a grin. That expression delighted Frog.

"You made me hot, then," Bill said, "for Billito is a mighty fine girl. Frog, and orn'ry as I am, a good girl is worth taking a wallop at a man's face for any time. I just was a fool, I reckon. What's on your mind except your hair?"

"Wanta know, really?" asked Frog.

"Uh huh," replied Lone Star.

"Some of the boys thinks kinda nasty things about you. You see Juan is away; Pedro hopped it to Mexico, or we thinks he did, when he was dead on his feet; Yellow Eye is dead; we don't see Spider, and the boys is working up a mad on you as a whole cause of this state of affairs. They don't know who you are and what game you and Spider is playing. Pecos and me, we understands you, but the other boys, shucks, they thinks, you thinks you're thorough-bred stock and not good enough for any of us. Let's fool 'em, willya?"

"How?" the query seemed filled with genuine anxiety.

"The boys I mentions, mostly, is Mexican hands. And these fellows and me are going up, directly, back of the hay barns to do some pistol shooting. How about you coming along, or just dropping in, casual-like, and taking a try with your gun?"

"I ain't much to the ton with a gun."

"Yea bo! you ain't much. I can see that. But you ties down your gun pants with a leather string, I see. And I never knew an apple knocker or a hay shoveler to do that."

Pistol practice? Back of the hay barns! What was the man driving at? He wanted to make a fool out Lone Star with a gun. He wanted to reveal his skill with a man's weapon over the boy who whipped Pecos with his fists. Very well, Frog might reveal something in a test of that kind. He'd accept.

"All right, Frog," he said calmly, "I have been in this house too much, and I reckon the boys is mostly right. I've acted as if I was the kind what would wear a high powered necktie and could carry a red headed cane. I'll come up as soon as I hear you-all burning powder."

"Tell the old man so's he won't think the army has arrived when he hears the shooting. We often do this thing. Better clean your smoke-pole, son, for I'm a hand with old man Colt's hardware."

"I'll tell Spider," answered Lone Star, and somehow Frog didn't like the way the comment was emphasized; but he was pleased a moment after as Lone Star turned to go into the house. "I'll convince you after my two guns are loaded. Ten shots will be enough for you. See you soon."

Ten shots, eh? This thought raced through Frog's mind as he hurried to gather his Mexican colleagues. Ten shots! The fool was one of those men who carried his gun with its hammer resting on an empty shell; afraid of accidents with a fully loaded gun. Good! But suppose Spider did not accept the result or was displeased with it? He'd have to accept. The Mex-

icans would have a story to tell. The other boys would make him, too.

Quickly he laid his plot, quickly seven Mexicans knew all of the details, and quickly they strolled, carelessly, one by one, some two hundred yards from the main cluster of buildings. A pair of saw horses was arranged as a target rack and a pile of tin cans was gathered. Boards were laid on the saw horses and on these twenty cans were placed, close together, in two rows of ten each.

Pecos had seen the furtive manner in which Frog had gone about gathering up the Mexicans, so when Frog ambled up to the meeting place, Pecos wound round the pasture and using the barn as a screen had approached unseen by Frog until he was able to work his way into the barn. Not twenty feet away the first of the Mexicans stood. Frog was anxious, several of the greasers watched the main buildings stealthily. Frog discharged his gun twice, quickly.

"He's coming," said a black Sonora vaquero.

"All right; you boys who have got guns stand out in front of this place, and off to one side. You others let him see that you ain't got a weapon. What I don't want him to skeer at is the idea that there's too many fellows packing six-guns up here. Maybe one of you boys better pull your gun and let it lay on the ground here." This was done. Frog and but two others carried revolvers on their persons.

"He's carrying a gun and looking at it as he walks," announced the Mexican who was watching Lone Star. Frog turned and waved a greeting. Lone Star took a hitch at his overalls and came ahead fast.

Pecos grinned and with a squirt of tobacco juice drowned a crawling fly on the wall of the barn. "This is going to be good," he mused.

"Brotad!" commanded Frog, using a rare Spanish word which profane use had given the meaning of "break out" or "rush out" or "start quickly." Frog thought that term would not be caught by Lone Star. The two armed vaqueros began rapidly firing at a can on the ground and they made that container jump and bounce. At last it was a torn and battered thing out of shape and lying some fifty feet away from where it had reposed before they began hitting it. As one went to bring it back the other reloaded his gun. Lone Star joined the group. The furtive looks in the eyes of the Mexicans, the unarmed Mexicans, registered on the youth's brain at once. He took position so that he had all of the men at his right side, even Frog. This was done with the appearance of casualness. But where he stood he dominated his companions.

"GOOD shooting, hombres," Lone Star said as the greaser with the can joined his fellows. Frog took the can. The Mexican punched out the empties and inserted loaded shells.

"Let's see the strange cowboy shoot," he said.

"How's the play?" asked Lone Star. "Does we shoot from here?"

"Yep," answered Frog. "Ten shots at them cans on the planks. You take them on the side next to you and I'll knock off these on my side. Does you want first crack?"

"Makes no difference."

"All right, then, I'll open. We generally practise nothing but fast snap shooting. As fast as a gun can be fired. From the hip, free hand, anyway. But the fellow what gets the most in the quickest time gets the rubber crow bar. Is that jake with you?"

"Go on, shoot, cowboy!"

"Twelve shots, if you say so, Slim. But it'll have to be ten this time for I carries only five shots in each gun."

"That's my way of packing a gun when I rides a horse. If I gets throwed I don't want no gun bouncing on a hammer and exploding a forty-five slug into my gizzard. Anyhow, what you can't do with five you won't make out with six. Fly at them cans, Frog. Let's see what kinda religion you has."

Bam! bam! bam! bam! bam!

One gun was used in lightning speed.

Five cans were missing from the plank.

Bam! bam! bam! bam! bam!

The other gun in Frog's hand beat a loud tattoo. Four cans had been knocked down. One remained. Then a Mexican who sat staring at a watch said in a voice filled with a mockery of amaze.

"Eight seconds, Frog!"

"But only nine cans," answered Frog. Then he folded his arms, each of his hands holding a gun pointing to his rear.

Pecos smiled. Then he poked his gun through a crack in the side of the barn. He was about to shout a warning to Lone Star when he saw the boy's left hand tilt

a bit then beheld its thumb jerk back the hammer of a gun. Rapidly that thumb rose and fell. Five times. And five cans vanished as a succession of barking crashes filled the air. "Slim," cried Pecos but he realized that his shout had been lost in the detonations of that heavy revolver.

Once more that crashing, smoke spitting volley of five shots and Lone Star's side of the board was clear of cans.

"Seven seconds!" exclaimed the Mexican holding the watch.

"Now," jibed Frog staring into Lone Star's eyes. "Knock me down, will ya? You sliver built, smoky-eyed son of a gun, here's where you gets salivated. You've caused all the trouble around here, you and Spider, and right now is where you hears the doxology."

He made a movement as though to unfold his arms.

Crack! Boom!

The bite of sound and its echo vibrated against the barn and flew wildly into the surrounding air. The Mexicans started in a panic of movement. Frog spun about, dropped both guns, and clutched, wildly at a shoulder.

"Let them guns fall to the ground, you greasers," ordered Lone Star, a stinging snap to his words as he swung his second gun into play and covered the group of Mexicans with it. "Thought you'd butcher me when I was packing unloaded guns, eh? Wait till I tell The Spider this."

THOSE who had guns tossed the weapons away. The others only stared into the sneering face of Lone Star. Frog had now dropped to the earth. Boys were on the run from the bunkhouse to the scene. Pecos moved out of his place of concealment and strode toward Lone Star. Up flew Lone Star's gun.

"There's a shell left, Pecos," he said calmly. "And if you drops a hand to your gun I uses it. If I misses that's my fault. If I don't that's your funeral."

"You pot hound, I hollered at you and tried to tell you. I was a-laying back in the barn and Frog never stood no chance, no time, to pull off this trick. If you hadn't drilled him I would have made him leak out of his back between the shoulders. Get yourself a pair of new guns. You can't tell what's coming off, when the rest of the boys gets here."

"Excuse me, podner, for thinking you was dirty," answered Bill. "You watch these yellow bellies and I'll feed my guns with some new fodder. I likes the feel of my own best."

Just as Lone Star finished reloading a number of the bandits arrived upon the scene. Pipe Stem was in their lead. With a fast sweep of the figure of Frog, and a quick glance into the fear-filled faces of the Mexicans he knew what had happened.

"Slim, what you gotta say?" he asked.

"I seen it all," answered Pecos. Then he told what had occurred. "But, boys, I wish you could 'a' been here to have seen how this lead pencil kid used that thumb of his'n. He hooked guns at his hips and mowed down them cans as if he had been knocking 'em off with a broom handle. I've seen fast shooting, but this hombre's better'n that."

"Get me away from here before Spider sees me," cried Frog.

"And me, too," pleaded a Mexican. "Good God, Pipe Stem, give me a pass so I can get through the guards in the hills. I want to go to Mexico."

"What you say, Slim?"

"Let them greasers go," replied Bill, "but Frog stays. I reckon Spider will want to have a talk with him."

And then Billito's voice could be heard ringing from the kitchen door.

"Oh, Slim," she cried, "come quick! The Spider is on the floor again and — oh, please come quick!"

"Get your horses," ordered Pipe Stem to the Mexicans. "I'll take you out. Some of you fellows carry Frog to his bunk. And you, Pecos, you keep an eye on him."

The Mexicans rushed to the corrals as Lone Star darted for the main adobe. In the eyes of Pecos dwelt a kindly light.

CHAPTER IX

BILLITO FACES WHAT?

THERE lay The Spider. A surge of pity welled up into Lone Star's mind. Then the horrible things on the plate rack filled him with disgust and his pity changed to loathing, a flood of revulsion for the being on the floor, the being who was twisting and retching as with an evil spirit. Of a sudden Spider stilled, rolled to an elbow and arose, weakly. He caught sight of Lone Star at once. A glad gleam leaped out of the dead depths of his miser-

able eyes. He sighed in a manner of content as though the presence of Lone Star had brought him peace.

"You did it, eh? What we talked about, a while ago?"

"No, I shot him through the shoulder; but I wish you could have been there. It was funny. Pecos had sneaked up and was hid in the barn back of us. If I hadn't got Frog, Pecos would have. Then, when the shooting was all over, here come the boys with Pipe Stem loping ahead of them. Frog is somewheres about and Pecos is watching him. The Mexicans, Pipe Stem is letting go."

"Letting go, Slim? Letting go where?"

"To Mexico, Spider!"

"He! he! eeeiii!"

The hidden and ghastly laughter sounded in the room. A sneaking look of fear spread over The Spider's features. He avoided the eyes of Lone Star and sought those of the girl. Once more came that fiendish mirth. And now Spider shook his great head as though to drive out of it the unreality of the sound his ears had heard. It seemed that a manner of shame had invaded him, as though he were ashamed to appear to hear that nameless dread before the puncher and the girl. But as the laughter rang the third time he rushed to his desk and threw himself into his chair, head on hands.

"Go out," he said, "I want to be alone. I'm done up bad."

Lone Star and Billito left him. And when they stood staring into each other's faces the girl lifted a finger to her lips signifying silence.

To have saved his soul Lone Star could not have resisted the impulse which came crashing into him at that instant. He extended his arms to the girl; and so Billito stepped into the hollow of Lone Star's arms. She shivered a little as his arms went about her and drew her close.

"You must, *querida,*" he said. "You must not be afraid. I am here and you are here, and nothing else matters. Listen," and then he dropped his voice until only she could have heard the words in that room. "I loved you from the first time I saw you. And that love has grown until it is bigger than me or anything that is in me."

"Oh, my dear," she murmured from her quavering lips. "I've been hungry to hear those words from you. But, now, what must we do? There are people in this house."

Lone Star held her off at arms' length. "What do you mean?"

"Somewhere in this house there are people. I heard voices a moment ago. First the voice of the one who laughs. Then the tones of another. I tell you, and I know I am right, The Spider is watching us, playing with us. In a while, a little while, perhaps the very next instant, he will kill you and then—"

There came the muffled, indistinguishable tones of a man's voice.

These came and went and struggled for freedom as though they were spoken through some muted tube. One knew them to be human, but the ear could not detect anything but an occasional vowel sound. Whether the speech was Spanish or English it was not possible to determine.

"You're right," said Lone Star. "I've an idea." She stared at him as though she did not want him to talk. "If we can't hear that voice, then we can't be heard," he said.

"Go on, but talk very low, whisper, Bill, please, dear man."

"I don't believe that Spider wants those Mexicans to leave him yet. Why not go back and tell him that Pipe Stem is riding away with them to get them by the outer guards and then get from him an order telling Pipe Stem to return. I believe I can do it. In case I do—I'll ride off to Paradise Valley for help."

JOY grew into instant profusion over Billito's cheeks. These flooded with a wondrous shade of carmine and her dancing eyes spoke of galloping thoughts.

"You couldn't. I do not believe you could," she said. "Spider told me that he had changed his mind about you. He doesn't want you to leave him for a moment. He's fond of you, and now depends on you to solve his troubles. But I could go. I know I could go. Let's try. I'll ask him to allow me to bring Pipe Stem and the men back."

"But where would you ride?"

"Ride?" she asked. "Ride to Paradise and tell your friends to come and to bring enough men to wipe out these vipers."

"No. Not wipe them out, Billito. Bring them in. I've an idea that if you could get Spider to give you a pass to go by the outposts, that I could convince him to take

the Apaches under Claw further down the river. And then, in that case, maybe I could romp out of that river, climb the hills, and beat my way to Paradise and join up with you. If you go there ride to Terry Hopwood's ranch and bring in the boys over Dead Mule Pass. I'll take care of things inside of this gulch. I believe that I can make some sort of deal with Pecos; maybe there are others, too. Frog told me, and I reckon he told the truth, that there is grief among the boys and they think Spider is trying to double-cross them. I know my being here with Spider has angered them."

A sharp bite of a creaking board sounded noisily in the room.

"Spider is coming through the hall," gasped Billito. She sprang to the window and was staring through it as Spider pushed open the door and shambled in.

"What you staring at?" he yelled at the girl.

"Pipe Stem," she answered. "He's about to ride out of the big pasture. And he's riding fast." Spider leaped to her side.

"If them Mexicans," said Lone Star, "was to get to Mexico, would they spill the beans on you, Spider? Would they, or would they not, stop Juan from doing what he's going to do? I've got a hunch that I did wrong when I let them go."

"Slim, did you let them go?"

"Spider, Pipe Stem asked my opinion and I said, 'let 'em vamos.' I always think that when they's a bad apple in a barrel it's best to get shet of it. But now, I'm not so sure I didn't deal you grief. They'll be packing a grudge ag'in you and me and they'll carry revenge and tell scandal to the Mexican police who will tell—"

"Pipe Stem must be stopped!" exclaimed Spider.

"I'll ride after him," offered Billito.

"No, I got something else for you to ride on," said Spider ferociously and the manner of the man sent a chill through Lone Star. The puncher was in the act of reaching for his gun, to take the desperate situation in his own hands and to destroy the outlaw, when Spider sent this thought hurtling out of his mind. "I want you to carry a note to Claw. Go get your horse and bring it around to this end of the house. Tell one of the boys to saddle Slim's bronc at the same time he does yours. We got a little time. And Slim can catch Pipe Stem before he gets into the trees. Four fast shots will stop him, Slim, if you see you can't overtake him. That's our signal that men are wanted at this house. Come on in with me. You, Billito, get ready to ride. But first tell a boy to get the horses."

Lone Star and the girl stood staring into each other's faces. Swift agreement raced from brain to brain. Billito understood in that stare that Lone Star acceded to Spider's point of view. The girl hurried from the adobe.

In his room Spider grasped a paper and pencil and scribbled a message in Spanish. This he handed with a wide spreading grin on his face to Lone Star, who read it at a glance. It was addressed to Claw, the Apache, who was guarding the cave's exit.

Bring enough men to wipe out all my gang and do the work three nights from tonight. Kill every hombre you find on my place except Slim, the man you met with Billito.

Take away every man you've got at the river. We are watched. Leave for your country as soon as this reaches you.

There was no signature but a miserable smudge of a drawing stood forth as the sign of The Spider. It looked like some manner of crawling thing. Lone Star grinned back at The Spider.

"Have you gone crazy?" he asked.

"Maybe. But I been thinking over what you told me that Frog said as he propositioned you to that pistol match. So my gang is all split up and sore at me and you, eh? I'll fix every one of them. Yellow Eye was killed. Fine! That means that somewhere in this valley The Lizard and the Hawk are hiding and that Frog has been sowing the stuff that is splitting up my crowd. They maybe will decide to kill me and you and take what they can get. I'll beat them to it. Claw wants to go to Yellow Eye's burial anyhow, and this will give him the chance. When we get rid of this crowd I'll throw myself together another one. At any event I'll play safe. I tell you, boy—"

"He! he! he! eeeeeiiii!"

That blood curdling gaiety! Its very presence suggested murder and the thought of murder; and it racked the nerves of Lone Star so that his face filled with the evidence that he had heard it.

"Thank God!" cried Spider. "You heard that, didn't you?"

What could he do? He knew he had re-

vealed what chaos was dwelling in his mind. Denial now would avail nothing. Better to admit it, and throw himself into Spider's mood. He nodded, then gasped.

"Sounds like a crazy man."

Spider rushed to the great door, slipped back its locks and stared into his own bedroom. Some moments he spent in this effort, then returned to Lone Star.

"Take this note to Billito," he said, "and ask her to deliver it to Claw and then to come back as soon as she can. I'm going to find out who's doing this trick on me."

A sudden glow of exultation spread over Lone Star's face as he accepted the note Spider had written; but as he was about to turn away the bandit grasped his wrist in a steely grip, "Look at me!" he commanded. Lone Star stared at him as would a wide-eyed school boy. "You're as clever as hell, Slim. But I'm clever, too. When you've delivered that thing to Billito ride as fast as you can after Pipe Stem and tell him to fetch me those Mexicans. I'm going to teach this crew a lesson."

"What's the use of salivating them, Spider? That wouldn't be a good idea of mine if I intended to allow the Apaches to clean out this place. I'd bring them back, of course; thataway means you're taking care that they don't squawk. But I wouldn't even talk with them. Lock 'em up, or tie 'em down, and let 'em think."

"Maybe you're right. But you bring 'em back on the run."

"SPIDER, what did you mean by saying I was clever?"

"I saw the dance of your eyes as I told you to take that note to Billito. And I warned you. Don't get ambitious and don't get careless, boy. You crowded your luck a whole lot when you bumped into this place without asking anybody. Let that chance you took be like winning the double O at roulette. Don't get stuck on Billito, for if you do, if you do—"

"What have I to win over a girl like her?"

Spider turned Lone Star loose and shoved him rudely toward the door. Bill met Billito just beyond the kitchen meat shack, under a tall pepper tree, and there slipped her the note. "Good luck," he whispered. "After reading that I think you'll see a way out for yourself and for me. Deliver that note, dear one, and then go back in the cave until Claw leaves with his men. After that—"

"Hi! Billito!" The Spider was calling."

"Yes, Spider," shouted the girl. "I'm coming!" Then to Lone Star she whispered as her eyes took in the message at a glance. "Goodby, for just a little while. If I can I'll go down the river, out across the desert and tonight will ride through the dark. No one can follow me and my pony, out on those sands." Then she ran swiftly to the kitchen and vanished through its door.

Lone Star mounted and galloped like a flash away from the ranch-houses. Three miles off he overtook Pipe Stem. Delivering his message he felt sorry for the Mexicans as gaunt fear and stark blankness of mind registered in their faces. Then one of them started away. Pipe Stem rode after him and with his rope jerked the man out of his saddle and dragged him over the earth. When the lass rope had been removed the shaking wretch was scarcely able to stand. Lone Star assisted him to his saddle and brought up the rear of the group as it moved back toward Spider's headquarters.

Roping his prisoners in a cabin and placing a guard outside of its door Pipe Stem accosted Lone Star and demanded the right to speak with Spider. "I've got to talk with that fool," he said. "If I don't take some word to these men before morning, hell's coming loose in chunks. I can't hold 'em a day longer."

"Then come on," said Lone Star. "He can't any more than refuse to let us in. But, don't be surprised at what you see."

"Meaning which?"

"He has had a fit. And he drops like a log and froths at the mouth like a dog." Pipe Stem blanched.

"Good God!" he groaned. "He always kills after them spells. I wonder who it'll be now. He kills, I tell you, after one of them fits. Maybe I hadn't better go in."

Then the door flew open and Spider appeared in its frame.

"What you a-wanting, Pipe Stem?" he asked in a surly tone.

Pipe Stem became rigid and his face livid; but he was resolute. "I gotta see you and do some fast talking. These men are on the prod and I'm afraid," he said without a quaver.

MANY of the boys, standing around the bunkhouse, were staring toward

the kitchen and watching the small drama taking place at its door. Spider saw them too, and waving a hand said, almost merrily, "Howdy, boys! Keep your shirts on. Big doings coming off, soon." Then to Pipe Stem he said in an aside. "Jump in here and get it over with fast." Pipe Stem walked hurriedly into the house. In Spider's room he told his chief exactly what was going on and what he feared. The affair back of the hay barns had added fresh fuel to the discontent of some of the men. Spider listened respectfully until Pipe Stem had finished; then he said calmly.

"You go back and tell the boys we're moving to Mexico in less than a week with all the cows. And let them have a good time tonight. Roll out that half barrel of whisky and give everybody all he wants who isn't standing guard. But whatever you do, watch Frog and them Mexicans. I don't want them to get away. How is Frog now?"

"He's got a sore shoulder, but the bullet just clipped a bone and went through the fatty part of his arm. He'll be all right in a week and could ride right now."

"All right, watch him. Where is he?"

"I got him locked up in the same shack with the Mexicans. Buck is standing over them both tonight. He's relieving Pecos."

"Fair enough. Here's some gold for them as stand watch tonight. I want everybody satisfied."

Pipe Stem received a handful of gold coins and left the room pleased. Outside a shout of joy announced the telling of his interview with The Spider.

"Magpies," muttered Spider. "Just like magpies. Pick your eyes out when you're down; fly up and laugh when you take a shot at them. Buzzards are clean compared to them skunks."

The sun sank back of the hills. Spider stared about the room in the gray half tones that were falling everywhere, then roused. "Slim, go tell Pipe Stem to send Pecos to this end of the cave. Have him wait there an hour; if Billito doesn't show up let him ride back and tell me. I don't like it, her riding there. Not at this hour of the day. I never thought at the time I sent her, but if The Lizard is in this valley, he'd take a lot of joy out of getting his hands on a girl like—"

"He! he! he! eeeiiii!"

"Come into this room you crawling slime!" Spider yelled the challenge into the air. Lone Star started toward the door. But he turned as Spider made a movement back of him. "Come here," said Spider. "Stand there, right there. Now!"

Out flew one of his great hands; and about Lone Star's throat slowly, and gently, went the encircling fingers. Bill's jugular vein swelled under the stress of blood as fear and indecision gripped his mind.

"What you doing that for?" he asked. Then came the laugh.

"He! he! he! eeeiiii!"

"I thought it might have been you," muttered Spider allowing his fingers to sink gently into Lone Star's flesh as that mocking susurration whirred in the room. "I got a idea that maybe you was a ventriloquist. But, God, kid, I'd suspicion an angel, now."

"You stay quiet until I get back. Maybe I'll go after her myself. How's that?" Spider smiled at Lone Star's offer.

"Didn't I tell you that I would suspicion an angel?" You tell Pipe Stem to send Pecos. I'll watch you while you do it."

CHAPTER X

THE TWISTED DAGGER

LONE STAR was conscious of those dreadful eyes playing over his person as he walked from the house and motioned for Pipe Stem who was engaged in bringing out a half barrel of whisky for the boys. Bill delivered the orders of Spider and went with Pecos to the barn as the great lumbering fellow hurriedly set out to obey the instructions Pipe Stem had given him.

"Pecos," said Lone Star, "they ain't no use I and you criss-crossing each other, is they?"

"You can't fog me up nor bog me down with any kinda make believe, cowboy. I seen your face go white when that girl screamed at you from the house this P.M. Boy, you're stung by that Mex *chico*. 'Too bad,' says I, to myself. 'Slim's the kind as would let the bottom drop out of his heart for a good girl or a bad.' Now what's rocking you?"

"No matter if she don't come back in an hour you go into that cave, after the hour is up, and look for her. Spider's got an idea somebody called The Lizard killed Yellow Eye. Now he fears for Billito. Who is The Lizard, Pecos?" Pecos went white!

He stared about the barn for an instant,

jerked his head this way and that, walked to the door, listened, then peered outside.

"He was the killer for Spider before Hawk. And Hawk came before Frog. What makes you say such things? The Lizard is dead. He was killed by Hawk. Just as Hawk was butchered by Frog. Them three got five hundred for every killing they done and them murders always had a piece of red mud at the place where they took place. The Lizard is dead, boy —dead as Hawk and he was the dirtiest rat that ever ran through the dark. And Frog ain't no better. What makes you say them things? You ain't listening to Spider, is you?"

"I pays no-nevermind to them as has fits, but what I heard my own self starts me to thinking."

"Fits, how fits?"

"Spider is having epileptic fits right fast and frequent, and there's something on his mind that brings 'em on." Lone Star saw that this news gravely affected Pecos. He went further with his revelation just to see how Pecos would act, what he would say or do. "Then I have heard a laugh in that house that didn't come from anybody in it. That funny screech would set the teeth on a saw, and it runs shivers up and down my backbone. First, I told Spider I didn't hear it, for I didn't want him to have another fit. But a while ago he caught me listening to it and I had to confess that I knew about it. Pecos, is there a cellar under that adobe?"

"No. The floor joist is laid on flat stones right on the ground. I helped build that adobe. Nobody could hide in that house unless Spider knew about it."

"How about that pivot door?" Lone Star barely spoke the question. "Did you know about that?"

"Yep, I and Buck and Spider swung that, too. It's built out of two-inch oak, double thickness, and centered with four-inch stuff. Then the whole frame is criss-crossed with half inch iron holding it solid. You seen them iron studded spots in them boards?"

"Uh huh."

"They goes through the boards on all sides. All them boards is held together by them bars of iron. The bottom is four inches thick and so's the top. She's a fine job, Slim, and fits like a glove. The pivot is a six-foot steel bar anchored top and bottom in inch iron, sunk in a eight-inch pole embedded in the adobe walls. Don't you worry none about nobody laughing in there that Spider don't want to laugh. If you think otherwise you're crazy. Them walls is all three feet thick; that pivot door is paneled so's Spider can peek into his bedroom before he goes into it; and out of it when he wants to get up. And them panels is boxed in out of iron wood stuff what Yellow Eye found and brought to Spider. Don't worry about that door. It'll hold and nobody's going to come in on Spider if he don't want 'em to. Boy, he's kidding you, and I'm wondering what for. When you gets the time won't you tell Pecos why you're here and who you are? Maybe I and you ain't so far away as you think. Now get on back to the house. I better be riding."

"Don't come back till you've found her, will you?"

Pecos' chuckle sounded in the dark of the barn.

Lone Star hurried to the house where Spider greeted him.

"What was you and Pecos chinning about?" he asked.

"I was thanking him for what he tried to do for me this afternoon and incidentally I told him that you was dead anxious to have him ride home with Billito."

"Good! Now let's go eat. Supper's been ready for some time."

THE whisky was working in the bunkhouse. The boys had grown noisy and their songs and laughter were ringing out over the valley. The night was dark and the sky full of lowering clouds. Spider, staring out of the window, said as though speaking to himself: "There's a big east storm coming up and sometime right soon she'll begin to blow. Maybe not for a day or two, but when you see them kind of clouds you can expect dirty weather out of the east. Listen to them wolves out there. You'll hear the bark of guns before long."

Out of the dark stillness, above the din of the confused clamor, rang a clear, high tenor voice. Spider grew tense as he listened attentively to the words which easily penetrated to his den.

"Oh, I am a Texas cowboy
Far away from home,
If I ever get back to Texas
I never more will roam.
Montana is too cold for me
And the winters are—"

The singer's voice died in a discord. The song ended in a way that quickened the pulses of Spider and Lone Star. Then Pipe Stem's voice could be heard. "Bring a light here!"

After this a babble of loud cries. "Didn't I tell you?" commented Spider. "Somebody's got hurt already. Give 'em booze and you get rid of all the weak ones."

Then a loud knocking sounded through the house. Lone Star, at a sign from Spider, left the room to return almost instantly with Pipe Stem whose face was like that of a dead man.

"Buck has been knifed, Spider," he said, "and is crumpled up outside the door where we had the Mexicans and Frog tied up."

"How knifed?"

"In the neck and the knife twisted in the wound."

SPIDER emitted a shriek. It was an involuntary cry that had burst from his throat. Fear prompted that scream. "The work of The Lizard," he said as he raved. Pipe Stem nodded an affirmative. Then he handed a piece of paper, a folded piece of newspaper, to The Spider. "I found this stuck in the shirt pocket of Buck," he spoke the words as though they had special significance.

The Spider unfolded the paper and Lone Star saw some soft, flaky bits of dried substance clinging to it. Some of these fell away as the paper was handled.

Shaving paper! There could be no doubt of that. The sound of the grinding of Spider's teeth in that room confirmed the surmise of Lone Star. This thing that the bandit chief held was the sign of The Lizard, the man who had killed Bill's father, the man who was dead and yet not dead. The Lizard had knifed Buck.

"How about Frog?" asked Spider in a monotone of agony.

"Gone."

"And the greasers?"

"Gone, too. And all of them are on horses."

"That means what, Pipe Stem?"

"Spider, I don't know. Pecos and myself and them boys in the hills are the only sober men on this place. And the whisky ain't half drunk yet. Shall I take it away from them?"

"Don't try that! You couldn't do nothing worse."

"What do you suggest?"

"Have you any idea why Pecos isn't back?"

"He oughta been here before this, unless—"

"You think—"

"I don't know. But if The Lizard gets a chance at Pecos he'll salivate him. You know how they hated each other?"

"How are the boys taking the killing of Buck?"

"They're excited and drinking more hootch. In a little while they'll forget all about it. All of them thinks that some one of them did it. They don't know what I know. If they did, say—I wouldn't like to be here. If they thought The Lizard was about here they'd be galloping into the hills. The Lizard is dead, Spider. You know he is dead. Now isn't he?"

Spider drummed the table with his fingers. Lone Star thought of his first sight of that hand and those fingers. Instinctively he shuddered. Then Spider gave voice to an order, in a slow, monotony of command.

"Go out and collect all the guns you can. Hide 'em. If you can get them all, so much the better. After that bring my bronc and Midnight, the pack mule, outside of my sleeping room window. Tie 'em up and stick my saddle gun in a boot. If The Lizard is in these hills I think he and I will meet, for I know where he'll head after killing Buck. I want that led-mule to bring his carcass back to this house on. Better put a pack saddle and a pack rope on it. I'll stick around until Pecos gets back, then I'll slide out."

"Your Midnight mule is lame, Spider."

"Then put the pack saddle on Slim's. It's fresh, ain't it, Slim?"

"Yes, and a great hill climber, too. It was born and bred in Paradise and sure is a mountain climbing fool. But I don't know about using him as a pack horse."

"He'll pack a dead man, all right. Go on, Pipe Stem, and you follow him out and lock the back door, Slim."

Pipe Stem hurried away and after Lone Star had locked the kitchen door he returned to Spider. Hardly had he seated himself before there came another rapping at the back of the house. This time Spider went to see who was at the door. He admitted Pecos. They came into Lone Star's presence in a hurry.

"SHE'S gone," gasped Pecos. "I waited a whole hour and then I busted into that cave. I went through it, fast. At the other end I halloed in Apache but no answer came back. Then I ducked back in the cave, sat down, and my hand touched this." He held up Billito's pretty little purple hat. "I listened, heard nothing, then I lit a match. I seen her little boot marks in the sandy floor of that cave, and from the way these was all helter skelter I figured she had been jerked around by somebody on a horse. Then I seen bits of this ag'in in the rocky sides of the cave." He exhibited pieces of the girl's waist. "Lighting a couple more matches I found some hairpins, a comb out of her hair, and her quirt. I reckon that tells the story. The girl has been grabbed and moved out with her horse. Would them Apaches do that, Spider?"

"No," answered Spider, "that's the work of The Lizard, Pecos. He has just knifed Buck and left this shaving paper in his shirt. You know how The Lizard always twisted a knife after he stuck a man?"

"Yes, I've seen them wounds. They won't heal."

"The knife had been twisted in Buck's neck, Pecos."

"Then he must have got Billito before he killed Buck."

"Why?"

"Spider, there's a place back in that cave, about fifty feet from the river, a thick sandy place it is, where I seen the imprint of her form as though she had been a-laying down on that sand. And I seen a place where her boot tops, them hand carved boot tops, had left their mark on that sand. I think she was hog-tied, hand and foot, and left there while the guy who roped her went away. I'll bet by this time that he's down the river and gone. Why wasn't them Indians able to stop him from coming into this valley?"

"Because," said Spider, "The Lizard killed Yellow Eye and has been in here for days. He must have been hiding in some of the rooms off the big cave and heard Billito pass him. Then he waited until she started back, grabbed her, tied her up, come on here, killed Buck, after talking with somebody among our gang, and then galloped back to the cave. Somebody here had a hand in this thing."

"That can't be," said Pecos. "I seen Buck as I rode away and I'm dead sure nobody rode around and beat me to that cave. Nope, that girl wasn't catched by the same men that killed Buck. And I don't believe The Lizard lives. I seen a fellow who attended the coroner's inquest in Laurel town where The Hawk killed The Lizard."

"I think that fellow lied, Pecos. I think all of them lied. The Lizard, Hawk and Frog have been working me all this time. Now they are after me and all the rest of the boys. Somebody knows that I'll pay a lot of real money to get Billito back. And somebody is going to make me pay."

From the bunkhouse came a roar as from the throats of so many snarling wolves. Pecos glanced in that direction out of the tail of an eye.

"You oughtn't to have dished out booze to them tonight. They were fighting mad as it was. Now they're plumb crazy and will explode at the least thing. Watch yourself, tonight, Spider. And if I was you I wouldn't do much looking out of windows. Some of them boys are sore as boiled owls at you. Maybe I reckon I better go and help Pipe Stem keep them down. Is they anything more I can do about Billito, tonight?"

"Nothing," answered The Spider, despair filling his voice. "In a few days and I'll hear exactly what it will cost me to get her back. Don't worry, I'll pay plenty."

"If The Lizard is hiding in this gulch then he'd be pretty liable to be up among the trees at the north end, wouldn't he?"

Spider smiled.

"If he didn't slide out with Frog."

"Frog gone?"

"Yes, and took them Mexicans with him."

"They'll kill them fellows standing guard out in the hills."

"I was thinking the very same thing. Ride out and see what you can find, Pecos."

"I'll go with him," offered Lone Star.

"No, Slim, you and I have a lot of talking to do before we go to sleep. Anyhow, on a hill prowling job like Pecos will have to do, the fewer men the better. He knows where the guards are located and can find his way in the dark. You stay with me."

LONE STAR was chilled with dejection. He wasn't filled with concern about himself, but a vast sinking came upon him as he contemplated the face of Billito. What a fool he had been to allow her to

risk herself in the venture. Why hadn't he swung about, in the hills, and followed her?

Pecos left the room and Lone Star did not miss him until Spider's voice roused him out of his benumbed state of mind.

"There's one thing Slim," he was saying, "and that is that I won't be worried about what's going to happen to me by The Lizard, or Hawk, or Frog."

"Why, Spider?"

"Because it's a cinch that these birds won't try to come anywhere's near me until after I've had time to get them the gold to pay Billito's ransom money. After that they'll fix me if they can; but they ran into a mint when they caught that girl and you bet they know it."

And then, out of the house, everywhere, came that spectral laughter. Spider leaped to his feet and ran to the plate rack. Grabbing two of the pieces of the red mud, those which lay under the numbers thirty-three and twenty-six, he hurled them to the floor and ground the clay to bits under his heel.

"He! he! he! eeeiiii!"

"That's a ghost, doing that," he yelled, "the ghost of them two men we butchered on the Frio. Look here, Slim."

He darted to his desk, opened a draw, drew out a book. A scrap book it was and in it were clippings telling of the murders of men and describing those crimes in detail. He ran his fingers to page twenty-six of that book. Here was an account of the killing of a rancher whose death had been an unsolved mystery; on page thirty there appeared a news item of another crime that had remained without a solution. The numbers on the rack agreed with page numbers in that book. Lone Star felt disgust fill him. The whole thing was so awful that Lone Star almost drew his gun in an attempt to take Spider out and so end his long deception. Then there sounded the dull thud of something falling into a groove.

"What was that?" asked The Spider. "It sounded near, didn't it?" The day had been too much for Lone Star and as this last ghastly suggestion of the unreal cracked into the gloomy silence of the room the cowboy lost his control.

"Spider," he yelled, "I'm going to my room. And I wants to lock my door and get me some sleep. If you don't let me I'll be tittering like a bat in a little while."

"Come with me," said Spider, "and I'll let you sleep in that small room off of mine. In there and you're as safe as though you were on top of the snow caps. And no kind of sound can get to you. If I have to leave this house you'll not be troubled. I'll lock the doors as I go out and nobody will disturb you. Come on."

He walked to the immense door, swung it on its pivot, entered his own chamber, and at its end unlocked a narrow door revealing a miniature bedroom with no windows but with tiny vent slits which would serve as ventilators. Flop there," he said, "and sleep as long as you like. Good night."

Lone Star flung himself face downward on the bed, but not to sleep. All he could think of was the form of Billito lying on the sand in that cave.

As Spider closed the thick door which locked Lone Star in that cell-like sleeping chamber he heard a soft tapping on the back door. In answer to this summons he found Pipe Stem waiting for him.

"The two horses are outside your window," Pipe Stem announced.

"Good," said Spider. "I'll be back before morning, if I ride off."

From the bunkhouse came the raucous tones of the drunken bandits.

Spider raced back to his room and strapped a pair of heavy guns about his middle. A manner of peace seemed to settle over his face.

CHAPTER XI

A BOX OF GIANTS

HOW long he had been asleep Lone Star did not know; but he awoke with the conviction that some one was near him. He moved his head, circled the room with a swift glance, and then his eyes fell on a spot of red glowing in the partly opened door which led to Spider's room. It rose and fell, rose and fell, that crimson spot, with regularity like that of human breathing. Then it vanished. Spider! Why was he watching?

Lone Star rolled over and went back to sleep. At seven he was up. As he opened Spider's door he saw the dwarf fully dressed, even to his boots, stretched out on his bed. The outlaw awoke at the first step Lone Star took inside of his room.

"Hi, old podner," greeted Lone Star. "You took that ride, didja?"

"Uh huh. But I was wrong. There hasn't been anybody up in them hills lately.

That is, there hasn't been anyone where I expected to find them."

"What time did you get back, Spider?"

"A little after four o'clock. I've had two hours' sleep; but that's plenty for me. Those wolves out in the bunkhouses have quieted down. I peeked in as I passed. And I wish you could have seen the way the place looks. Men are not much above hogs when they're drunk in bunches." But Lone Star did not hear this last comment. He was thinking of Spider's hour of homecoming.

Four o'clock.

Then who was smoking in Spider's room at two?

He decided to say nothing to Spider of his dilemma. In that house of riddles this last mystery was put aside as an inexplicable quality that was best accounted for by believing Spider to have lied. Lone Star let it go at that. "I'm hungry," he said. "Let's eat."

But had he mentioned that cigarette to Spider many things which were to happen in the next few days would have been averted. Such a little thing. In after years Lone Star shuddered as he thought of what he had overlooked as he stared down into Spider's face and saw the man arise painfully from his bed and dash a bit of cold water over his gargoyle face.

But the moment passed, and Lone Star waited for Spider to unlock a huge brass padlock which held a bar across the bolts of the pivotal door. The key to that lock Spider drew out on a long ribbon which was looped about his neck.

"I lock myself in with this," he said "and I know I'm not going to be ambushed when I sleep." The fool!

Inside his den Spider walked to his desk, picked up a pad of paper, read some writing on it, swung about and stared at Lone Star. "Was you in this room last night?" he asked queerly.

"Say, what's eating you? You locked that big door, didn't you? And it's three feet thick, ain't it? How could I reach through that panel and unbolt them iron? Have a little sense, willya?" Lone Star was becoming fed up on this man's idiotic ways.

"Read that." Spider handed Lone Star the pad.

You're next. Nothing will save you. Unless you bore a hole in the sunlight today. You think I want your gold. I don't. I want your blood, and I'll get it, sure.

That scrawl was as miserable as the threat which it conveyed.

Lone Star returned the writing without a comment.

Spider rushed to the rear of the house; looked at the windows; examined the kitchen door. Every place was securely latched and locked.

"Somebody was in this house, sure," spoke Spider in a shadow of his wonted voice. "And why ain't the cook got something going on this stove? Was he drunk, too?" He opened the kitchen door, ran around to a small wing alongside of the kitchen, opened its door and jumped back in surprise. Lone Star, who had partly followed him, jerked to instant alertness as he saw the frightened eyes which Spider turned on him. "Come here, Slim," he said. "I want to show you something." Lone Star hurried to Spider's side. "Look," whispered Spider.

THERE, lying face down, just inside his door, was the old Mexican cook. A long butcher knife was visible sticking out of the man's neck and the wound surrounding this knife was nothing less than a sheer and jagged oblong hole.

"The twisted knife," murmured Spider. "That's The Lizard again. You don't believe in ghosts and such like things, do you?"

"I never seen a ghost, Spider, and I don't believe one of 'em would have left that thing there." He pointed to the imprint of a human palm on the gory floor beside the dead cook.

"The gloved hand," moaned Spider. "The Lizard isn't working alone." Then he shook as with the ague. He closed the door with a jerk, hurried back to the kitchen, ran through it and into his room. Lone Star stuck to his heels. Now was the time to make his getaway. Good luck had dealt him a handful of aces.

Why not kill Spider as he sat; get a pony and ride for the cave? The boys were all drunk, Pipe Stem and Pecos would not interfere, knowing how close he had become to Spider. But he couldn't murder a man in cold blood. Not like that. Not with Spider trembling like a fear-stricken child and bereft of all power of defense. No, he couldn't do that; but if he could make

Spider reach for a gun, then he could destroy him with a semblance of justification to his own conscience. He'd try. But—

Spider was speaking out of a throat which rattled and jarred his words.

"Go tell Pipe Stem to come here, quick," he ordered.

Lone Star felt the dominant quality of this man's spirit; for at those weakened tones he turned about and walked from the room doing Spider's bidding without thought of delay. When Pipe Stem came back with him Spider said, "Slim, let Pipe Stem and me have the room, boy. I'll call you in a minute."

And it was in about a minute that Pipe Stem came out and hurried to the barns. Lone Star saw him throw a saddle on one horse and a pack outfit on another. Then he watched the man as he brought the horses to the side of the house. Lone Star heard Spider's voice calling him and left the window where he had been watching Pipe Stem.

"Now, Slim, here's the scheme. I'm going to take The Lizard's trail. I've got a hunch that he was around this place last night, and that him and Hawk are sleeping today. Pipe Stem tells me there is boot sign around the cook's room, and about the spud cellar and milk house. That sign, he says, plays out at one spot and horse tracks start from there. I'm going to pick that track up and run it down. Meantime, while I'm gone, you stick close to this room. And Pipe Stem and Pecos will get the boys up after while, and will tell them of Buck and the Cook and Billito. When them skunks is able to ride we're going to comb these hills and what I mean is that we're going to take a look-see at every place where a weasel even could hide."

"Then maybe tonight Claw will romp in here and butcher them same men, eh?" asked Lone Star. "Say, you're rottener than I ever thought a man could be. Why don't you tell your boys to beat it. Give them a chance, Spider. They're crooks, and low down as a snake's ankle, but they have worked for you, remember that; and made you money."

A fierce flame of fury burst in the smoky centers of Spider's eyes. "Look out," he said, "and don't you get careless. I've liked you, but don't try to hurrah me at this minute."

Lone Star saw the front part of Spider's desk fall and a double barrelled shot gun's muzzle covering the exact center of his body. He smiled in a foolish, quizzical way.

"I can talk, can't I?" he asked. "I was thinking of the best thing for you to do. The best thing for you and me, too. We got to get away."

"The best thing for me to do, now," said Spider, "is to kill! Kill! Kill everybody I meet until I'm safe. This game is like a snowball rolling down hill. It gets bigger and tougher all the time, and travels faster and faster, but somewhere it's got to bust up because of its speed and its size. And why I ain't pulling this trigger I don't know. Now you listen and do what I say. Go inside that room where you slept last night and stay there. Jump!"

ANYTHING to get away from the line of those gaping black barrels! Lone Star walked to the wide open door, passed through it, heard it close swiftly back of him and then stared about him at Spider's bedroom. How his heart sank, and how his mind flew along impossible paths of suggestion. His folly at ragging Spider had removed whatever chance he had had of making his escape. He went into the cool little chamber where he had slept and sat down on the bed. Now *what* could he do?

The morning dragged by. The clock in Spider's room tinkled the hours as they went. Noon came. One, two, three o'clock. Yet Lone Star sat disconsolately upon his bed. Then he heard his name called faintly. He went swiftly to Spider's room and leaned his head against the panel of the pivotal door. "Open your panel," said a voice. It was strained, unnatural, but it was that of Spider.

Lone Star pulled back the inside panel of the door. Three feet away he made out the face of Spider.

"I've decided to leave this country, Slim, and to leave it fast. And I've also decided to head off Claw from killing all these boys. Not that I've turned toad, but I think it'll be best for me in the long run. Here's a pass that will take you through the Apaches or the boys on guard in the hills. In three hours you'll be let out of your room, by Pipe Stem, and then I want you to hit the sunshine for a place on the Rio del Carmen called Solita. Get that, Solita?"

"I know the place," said Lone Star.

"There's some paper money in that pack-

age for you and when you and I meets up there'll be plenty more of the same. I'm running away from something I can't see and can't fight; but when you and I meet in Solita we'll carry the grief to these babies in a fashion that will do them plenty good. That's why I'm leaving this gang and all them cows. Goodby, boy! It ain't that I can't trust you, that I don't take you, but it's because I don't know, that's all. Something tells me that you are my kind of man and yet something tells me to take this ride out all alone." Spider snapped the panel shut. Lone Star could have leaned a shoulder through his opening and with his fingers have thrown back the other panel, but he didn't. A sense of overpowering impotence came to him. He felt inadequate to the occasion. Closing his panel on his side of the door he sat down and unfolded the parcel Spider had left in his hand.

In it was a pass signed by Spider which would allow the bearer to enter and leave the valley. Then there were ten large bills. That was all. The clock ticked away in a rapid stroke which sounded like a mockery. Tick, tick! Tick, tick! Tick, tick! Lone Star threw back his head and laughed aloud.

The sound of his mirth in that thick-walled, high-ceilinged room echoed in his ears with a diabolical vibration which sobered him. Around the room strayed his eyes. The windows were heavily barred inside and out. No escape that way. The door he knew to offer no relief. The floor was of heavy timbers and the room in which he had slept contained no exit whatever except into Spider's room. What could he do? He surrendered to a vast despair. Wait, that was all he could do, until Pipe Stem released him. He lighted a lamp as the afternoon wore away. Six o'clock came. Seven. Eight.

PIPE STEM did not come. Was he to die of thirst and starvation in that hideous place? The thought appalled him. Then he saw a box. It was staring at him from under a pile of old duffle in a corner and upon its side he made out the legend, GIANT POWDER—40%. Here was the thing, the very thing; the very thing, if it could be exploded. Where were the caps? And was there a little fuse?

Lone Star didn't know it, and in fact hardly gave the matter a thought, but Spider had put the powder in his bedroom at the one place from which it would be impossible for his men to steal it when drunk or in a rebellious mood.

Lone Star pulled the objects that covered the box away and saw that the powder container had already been opened. Among its sawdust he made out a few boxes of Number Two caps and a coil of fuse.

How his heart leapt! At least he would not suffer death by a slow route. He surveyed the huge door. It offered the best chance for a quick getaway. The window might afford a channel of escape; but if he didn't blow out the iron at one shot he would warn Pipe Stem and the others and they would run to the place where the explosion had sounded. It was the door and the door alone; and one blast must do the work. This would have to be a large one, and it would fill his room with the deadly pungent, stifling fumes of the powder. One blast it would be. And a shot above and below the door where its pivot reposed in the sockets of wood and iron. The fuses could be approximately timed to detonate simultaneously. Over his head, hanging to the wall, was Spider's hunting knife in a leather sheath. Lone Star took this, elected a spot above the center of the door, and began rapidly to dig away the adobe wall.

The grating sound of that blade as it hacked and chipped the dried earth from the wall gave back a loud and piercing noise. But another sound mingled with this. It came from the outside of the house, far off.

Rifle fire!

Rifles were cracking out there in the hills. He dropped the knife and hurried to the window, but he could see nothing. The shooting was going on on the other side of the building. That was why Pipe Stem had not come.

Back he flew at his task of drilling a hole for the powder. At last he could go no further. The depth of the knife had been reached and this was twelve inches. At the bottom right edge of the door, where its frame fit snugly to the wall, he worked away at the huge bricks. Here he made a twelve-inch opening in fast time. Then he selected enough powder to fill both holes, inserted caps and fuse, dropped the explosive into the places he had prepared, plugged these with pieces of cloth cut from Spider's old clothes, touched a match to each fuse and ran into the little bedroom.

As he closed its door he thought he heard

a sound. He stopped, stared at the sputtering fuses, and then he knew that his ears had not misled him. The sound was there and it was coming from that door. Coming from the door or from the wall.

Thud, kaplunk! Thud, kaplunk! Thud, kaplunk!

Something was moving under the floor of the door. The vibration was perceptible in a loose board inside of Spider's room. The fuses were getting shorter. One had already entered the cloth plugs with which he had spudded the charges of giant. He jerked his door shut. Then came a roar, and plaster fell from the ceiling upon his head. Another crashing report and a long crack zig-zagged its way along the wall to Spider's room. But the door had not jammed. This much he learned as he turned its knob and sprang into the smoke of the other room. What a sight met his gaze!

The heavy door was gone. It was now a mass of wrecked wood and twisted iron bars. And in its place was a hole; a great, yawning black hole, from which the face of a man appeared. And what a face! Then a form jumped into this hole from the outer room, and as it was about to disappear its head turned and the revolting countenance stared into the boy's eyes. Without comprehending details Lone Star knew that the face he was staring at was that of The Lizard. The muddy, blinking, oblique eyes; the flattened nose, the pinched skin, of varied hue, the instant suggestion of a reptile crashed Bill's mind with the realization that The Lizard was about to vanish beneath the amazing floor of that house.

To prevent this Lone Star was on the verge of drawing his gun when he heard the voice of The Spider.

"Don't kill him, Slim! Leave him to me!" it rang gloatingly.

Bill stared through the demolished door to see Spider in the other room, and he was walking slowly toward the spot where The Lizard was becoming an invisible shape amid the low-hanging powder fumes around the hole. Then he was gone.

There was a rush, as Spider leaped into action and darted to the hole; and then a surge of wind, caused by a sudden draft of air from the rear of the house, cleared the room of its powder vapor. Spider was dropping into that hole after The Lizard. "Follow me, Slim, and use your gun as a club." he yelled.

"Ain't he got a gun?" asked Bill.

"No, I knocked it out of his hand. He was in my room when I came in, and for a minute I thought he was a ghost. Then came the explosion. I leaped for him, but he kicked my gun out of my fingers and I near broke his arm twisting his Colt from his grip. But he turned and cracked me on the chin and jumped for the door just as I saw you standing looking at him."

"They's another man in that hole, I see his face just before I seen The Lizard. I think that man is—" cried Bill.

"Hawk. I seen his face, too," interrupted Spider.

Then he dropped from sight. And after him hurried Bill, legs working into a great cavern, body bent and head lowered to avoid the jagged timbers which made up the floor's joists. Now the boy realized that he was in a tunnel; in a shaft of some kind which wound its way under that house.

A scuffle sounded ahead of him in the dark as Bill made a semi-sliding, burrowing passage along the tunnel. What was that? Had Spider got his devil's hands on The Lizard? He hurried on, felt the legs of The Spider, then the tunnel ended in an abrupt drop which fell away into a cellar-like room.

Into this place fell Spider and on top of him came Bill.

The two disentangled themselves and rolled asunder. Directly before them came a flash of yellow flame and after this the acrid, pungent odor of burnt powder. A gun had crashed in the heart of that confined space, and before it could sound again The Spider's gun barked and a man groaned and cursed.

"Give him another," cried a voice.

"He hit my gun," came the answer. "And busted my thumb. You get him, Lizard."

"Ha! ha!" Spider's fiendish laughter rang in the air like a hideous cry of utter joy. It numbed Lone Star.

"You two are my meat now," roared The Spider. "My meat, and I'm coming after both of you. All your guns gone, eh?"

He slid past Bill, and as he went, arms extended, legs slithering along, body brushing that of the cowboy, his contact with Bill's person was of such nature that the boy shrank involuntarily from it as from a nameless dread.

"Out this door, Hawk!" yelled The Lizard. "Do you savvy?"

A grunt made answer.

And, as if by some sweep of magic, a bit of light strayed into the compartment which was filled with the fumes of the pistol shot. A door, a sliding, partitioned door had opened. Then dark came again, but not before two figures, like silhouettes, had passed through that slice of light.

THE wonder to Bill was that The Spider had not shot one of those forms. What had come over the man? A match flashed and illumined the hole. Its glare revealed a stout two-paneled sliding door set in a low heavily timbered frame at an end of the room. Back of this The Lizard and Hawk were working their way to freedom, or to weapons.

The Spider's face revealed in the match's light was a mass of smirking muscles and a nest of malevolent smiles. The light failed. "I've got 'em," whispered The Spider. "That door is jammed, I seen its back side in that light. Get a holt with your gun muzzle under your end, and I'll do the same with mine. Bear down on it, when I lift, and we'll set that slide out of its groove. Are you ready?"

Bill's gun found a spot under the bottom of the panels, and using his weapon as a pinch-bar laid his strength upon it. "All set," he said.

"Let's give it to her," ordered Spider and both heaved instantly.

Some cracking sound came, and then The Spider's body hit the slide and sent it crashing inward, flooding the hole with a thin light as from some distant, open door.

Through the opening leapt Spider and after him rushed Bill.

Ahead of them struggled The Lizard and Hawk across a mass of roughened earth, strewn with short timbers and other debris. Twice The Lizard fell, and twice Hawk pulled the man to his feet. They had nearly gained that square of light which appeared like an open door when Lone Star realized that this was a shaft which led from above. They were trapped, those two men ahead, and had to gain a saw-horse upon which to stand in order to effect their escape through that hole which led above. They were too late!

Realizing they couldn't make the shaft, they suddenly changed their tactics. The Lizard swung about just as The Spider bore down upon him. He ducked, picked up a short length of two-by-four and was about to crash Spider's skull with it when Bill's fist hurtled against his chin and sent him piling into Hawk with terrific force. The Spider was upon both men in a flying leap. Hawk screamed in pitiful agony.

"My God," he cried, "my arm, my arm, he's broken my arm!"

There was no mistaking that cry. It came of a pain-filled being the agony of which told Bill that Spider was launched into a debauch of bone cracking with those horrible hands of his.

"Don't, Spider, for God's sake, don't!" again the voice of Hawk. And then a sickening sound, a sudden report, a report that filled Bill with horror at the suggestion that another human bone had been snapped as one would break a twig.

Spot-lighted, now, directly under the shaft, Spider, The Lizard and Hawk were easily discernible to Bill. The Lizard's torso was held in a perfect scissors by Spider's legs, and his hands were playing viciously over Hawk's upper body. Then these lifted to Hawk's throat, and while one circled the man's neck, the other closed its tentacle fingers about the point of the chin. Like a drama, like a mimic play, Bill stared at the scene with his outraged senses reeling at what he saw. Instinctively he realized that Spider intended to break Hawk's neck with a reverse twist of that chin, and a backward crunch of those fingers gripping the man's throat.

With a mighty effort his right arm went around Spider's head and in a powerful headlock he twisted Spider's face away from Hawk. That effort had the effect desired. Spider released Hawk's chin and his fingers drew away from his throat.

"Let him go!" yelled Bill. "Can't you see you've broken both his arms?"

The action had caused a tremor to race along Spider's frame, and this had caused a convulsion in his legs which gripped The Lizard, for that head-lock had had in it a power which punished Spider.

THE LIZARD, free from those vise-like limbs, twisted quickly and was arising to his feet when Bill tore upon him and crashed him to the earth. But before he could get his hands on the man The Lizard was jerked from under him as if a giant hook had whisked him away. Bill turned to see Spider holding one of The Lizard's feet in his great hands and drawing the man down into the darkened recesses of the hole. Instantly those vile

depths of shadows assumed the proportions of a spider's web, and The Spider by his very movements became an insect entering with a prey into the heart of its meshy den.

Something flashed in the dim light. A knife! A blade in the hands of The Spider jerked from the region of the man's boot. A cry rang into the narrow space of that tunnel. The knife flashed again and again. Then came The Spider's rasping cry of exultation.

"I've sure made a ghost outa this guy, now!"

"Have you——" began Bill.

"You bet, I fixed him with my knife Come on, we've got to get out of here, and get out fast. Make for that saw horse and climb up through that hole above you. Get going, boy, your horse is outside, and hell's loose over these sands."

This wouldn't do! No, it would not do to allow The Spider to remain down there. He'd have to compel The Spider to crawl through that shaft, first; but how?

"You better help me," he said, in a weak voice, "The Lizard hurt me." Spider was at his side in a rush.

"Where you hurt?" he asked.

"I don't know, seems like in the throat. I'm weak as a cat. You go up ahead, and pull me up by a hand."

Hawk was groaning directly beside the overturned sawhorse. And his eyes were playing over the hideous face of The Spider with a gaunt fierceness which staggered Bill as he stared at them. Then Spider straightened the sawhorse, and stepping upon it was about to reach into the shaft when he laughed.

"I know where this leads to," he cried. "It reaches to my spud cellar. These babies dug down to this level, from the spud hole and cut out this tunnel up to my big door. You low-livered skunk," he cried into Hawk's startled face, "how long you been rigging under my house?"

"Off and on, for months," answered Hawk. "Say, Spider, do you know who this kid is?"

"Who let you use that cellar?" asked Spider paying no heed to Hawk's query. "Who was he?"

"That cook of yours. We had to kill him, for at the last minute he turned ag'in us because we had to kill Buck to get Frog loose. Let me live, Spider, and I'll tell you a lot. Hurley had been ag'in you from the first. He was the one who framed The Lizard ag'in you, and made me turn ag'in you, too."

Hurley? Who was Hurley? The query romped through Bill's brain as his fingers stole toward his gun. Then he knew. Hurley was a questionable lawyer of El Paso, a man whom the Texas authorities had been suspicious of for many years, but had never been able to trap. Now at the sound of the name Bill wondered what effect it would have on The Spider, and what Hawk would say next. But Spider relieved the tension of this clicking second of suspense.

"The cook, eh?" he said, "and you two killed him after he'd let you lay this trap for me. Well, here's where I finish you."

He dropped and clearly he intended to fall with both feet on Hawk's face and neck; but the man side-rolled out of danger. And, then——

FROM above came a rattle of sound, a mere shred of sound, more like an expiring echo than anything else, but it conveyed to Bill that outside rifles were barking and revolvers were firing in a perfect fury. Spider leaped toward the shaft.

With a foot poised on the sawhorse he found Bill's eyes.

"Slim," he said, "when I come back to the house I seen our boys stringing out to meet a gang of horsemen coming down the gulch. And them fellas was Mexicans. Billito's brother Juan was leading 'em and they was strung out to carry plenty of fight to us. Now you and I gotta get out of here. I've got all my loot hid out on my pack horse and you and I will beat it from here and make for Mexico. Give me your hand, when I gets into the cellar. Your bronc is all ready to ride and tied just outside this adobe, I got it before I came into the house."

At this instant Hawk let out a roar.

"Spider!" he yelled, frantically, "Don't leave me here to die, not with this fellow! Take me with you!"

"Leave you?" answered The Spider. "I should say so, and when I do I'll set this place on fire and fry your rotten heart in your own fat."

"Don't do that, why, this——" Hawk stared quickly at Bill who saw that the man knew his identity from the understanding which flamed out of his eyes; but he never finished that cry. Bill reached down, grasped him by the neck and hurled

him aside. Simultaneously he whispered into his ear.

"If you blat one word I'll feed you to those greasers outside and I'll see that with Juan. Keep still and I'll see that you ain't hurt. I'm wanting you to talk in a court room about Spider."

Relief flocked into Hawk's face; relief that was like a tonic which had the power to drive fear from the man's wretched countenance. It was like a hand had wiped all misery from his face.

"Hi, Slim!" yelled The Spider. "What's wrong, down there? Gimme your paw and let's get out of here! The boys are falling back before them Mexicans! We've just got time to beat it!"

One look Bill gave to Hawk, saw that the man had no intention of exposing him, and then leaped upon the sawhorse and extended a hand to Spider who jerked him out of the shaft with a single yank of his long arm. Standing on the floor of the spud-cellar Bill was amazed at what he saw. A trap door was revealed which had covered the shaft, and boxes and bags beside this told of how it had been screened. Spider moved to the entrance, peered out, turned and said to Bill, "Come on, let's make it for the house. I got to get something. Follow me!" He was gone and after him tore Lone Star Bill to arrive at his heels as he rounded the kitchen. What a sight met his eyes!

Less than a quarter of a mile away he saw two thin lines of fighting men. One of these, the bandits, was falling slowly back toward the ranch buildings; the other, clearly Mexicans, was advancing step by step, from rock and bush, to rock and bush. And one lone, stalwart figure at its head held his vision. It was the tall straight form of Juan, Billito's brother, and he was trying, with a few of his fellows, to cut off Spider's boys from reaching the shelter of the houses. Pipe Stem was seen fighting furiously and fearlessly; then he fell, rolled over and lay still. Pecos darted away from his fellows, dropped back of a stone, turned and caught Bill's figure standing by the kitchen door.

Bill waved a hand at the man, saw him get up, watched him start to the house, and then Bill was jerked inside the door by The Spider.

"You fool," cried the bandit chief, "don't stand gaping there!" Rustle up some grub while I go to my room." He shoved Bill toward a small room off the kitchen as he hurried to the front of the house.

But Lone Star didn't longer delay that which he felt he must do now, if he was to do it at all. He wanted to get The Spider tied up and secured as his prisoner before Juan entered that adobe. Once inside and he felt the Mexican would kill Spider, and this wasn't what Bill wanted. He wanted to get his man alive. The thought whipped through him and set him afire, and after Spider he tore and reached the main room just as Spider was jamming the record book of the murders under his belt.

THE rush with which Bill came into the room carried him to The Spider's side before he could be stopped. Then out came his gun. "You're my prisoner!" he cried. "It's been a long wait, but I've got you now! I'm Lone Star Ryan and I arrest you for the murder of my——"

The sentence was never finished. Out flew Spider's arm and something crashed against Bill's skull. When next consciousness came to Lone Star he opened his eyes to see, first, Juan; and back of him the grinning face of Pecos.

"Slim," yelled Juan, "where is my sister?"

"I don't know, but I think——" answered Bill.

"I know," yelled Pecos, "Spider is beating it for the cave. He raced out of here like a wolf, turned down the creek, and when next I saw him he was leading a pack horse and fanning it for a getaway. That was maybe an hour ago. What'd he do to you, kid?"

"An hour ago?" asked Bill. Could it have been that long since he threw his gun on Spider? Had he lain unconscious for an entire hour? It seemed incredible; but a trickle of blood dripped down from his face. Drops fell upon his hand, he tottered, and would have fallen had not Juan steadied him. An hour? And now The Spider was gone, gone with a lead that might be the means of making good his escape. But Juan was staring at Pecos in a curious way and that look jerked Bill from his reverie.

"You said you knew where my sister is, Pecos?" asked Juan.

"I have an idea that Spider has her hidden in the cave, and when he leaves here that she'll go out with him. Now ask Slim what I told you when we come to this place," exclaimed Pecos.

"Slim," said Juan, "when my men surrounded this bunch of minks Pecos surrendered to me. He said you were inside this house with Spider. And he said that you'd vouch for him. How about it?"

"He done me a good turn, and I'm satisfied he's quit being a crook. Let him go, Juan, and let him ride out with me after Billito. I've a hunch she isn't with Spider, and never will meet up with him," replied Bill.

"So have I," said Juan. "Late this afternoon I saw dust coming this way across the desert and that means—"

"That means," cried Bill, "that she's bringing Paradise boys, or has sent them. Listen, now, both you fellas, I'm not Slim, my name is Lone Star Bill Ryan and I'm after this gang. Down under this house there's two men. One knifed to death by Spider and the other with two broken arms done by the same man. I'm going after that Spider and I'm riding out now. If them are Paradise boys you seen tell them where I've gone, and what I'm after. But, Juan, you get that man in the hole under this place. Go out to the spud cellar, drop into a shaft there, pull that fella up and don't let him die. Understand me, now, don't let him die."

"Are you Lone Star Ryan?" asked Juan.

"Yes, and I've been tracking this bunch for years. Spider killed my daddy or had the knifed guy in the tunnel below us do it. Any how he's the big wheel that worked the gang and I want him for my own. Come on, Pecos, get yourself a horse and join me. If you want to save your neck do what I say pronto!"

Pecos leaped for the door and raced for the stable.

"You ought not to leave here, Lone Star," said Juan, "you've a large wound in your scalp and you've lost a lot of blood. That's a hard ride you're on. Stay a little while and then my men and I will join you."

"Why, man, you're dead on your feet now, and so are your men. It's me riding Spider's trail and watching which way he's heading. You may not know it, but, say, I'm coming clean to you. I'm in love with Billito and nothing's too hard for me to do that will let me know she's safe. It's just that in my blood, and I gotta go."

"I had that hunch, and I saw a strange something in my sister's eyes when I rode away. It was what you did to Frog when he slurred my sister and the look she gave me just before I left that changed me from a crook to a decent sort of man. Right then I thought you weren't like these other fellows, and I know that Billito felt the same way."

"These men with you are honest then?"

"Yes, I brought them here to break up this gang and to rescue Billito. Ask me anything to prove this and I'll demonstrate it to you."

"Juan, corral all this gang and stay here until you do it. Can I depend on this?"

"Absolutely."

"Now I'm gone. Get me a little something to eat while I fix up this wound in my head, willya?"

Juan hurried into the kitchen and Bill busied himself washing out a jagged wound in his scalp. A trifle lower and the object which Spider had used would have struck him in the temple. When he finished with the first aid treatment Pecos announced that he was ready and Juan delivered some lunch to Lone Star.

At a rapid pace Bill and Pecos left the ranch and headed for the cave. Over the earth spread the brilliant light of the desert stars and a large and golden moon.

"Look," said Pecos pointing toward the east, "there's a big storm getting ready to break out yonder! Don't you think this is a fool sorta trip, Bill?"

"No! If Spider went down the river from the cave he musta seen them Paradise Valley fellows' dust coming this way. If he did this he probably went ahead slow; and as he has a pack horse with him we sure enough can tail him faster'n he can work them two broncs over the sand."

"But in this light can you track a horse, far?"

"Tracking a bronc in this kinda light is just like shooting fish to me. All I'm hoping for is that that storm won't bust on us until I can get close to Spider."

CHAPTER XII

THE WHITE DEATH

MIDNIGHT on the desert! A tang, a snap and an invigorating tonic quality to the air. But an indefinable something in the body of the wind, in the *feel* of the atmosphere, which

drove home to Lone Star that a storm was working that would bring high and constant wind which would last for hours.

Heads down, hands over pommels, bodies erect, legs held rigid, Pecos and Bill forged ahead at that marvelous western gait—a combination of fox trot and singlefoot. That pace simply ate up the miles. And those horses! They knew that the men on their backs were after something ahead; that a chase was on. And as the chase is ever the greatest game to men, so it is to all animal life.

Now the range came into sight. Then came the foothills and the long climb to Magpie Pass. Below was Paradise Valley and the White Sands.

Bill's eyes strayed on these as if some evil in that pallid vista charmed them. But down he went into Paradise; on he rushed. And as he galloped the sun came up out of the east and the air filled with bird songs. This combination of song and dancing light buoyed Lone Star, but not so much as the revelation of the hoof marks of Spider's horses. One of these exhibited a peculiar flanging of the shoe of the left hind foot. This showed to the trained mind of Lone Star that the horse had an overgrowth on that hoof which the blacksmith had been compelled to correct with that curious plate. But Spider was sure traveling fast.

"Never mind," he mused, "I've got him now; and nothing can keep him from me. That shoe settles it. I'm going to catch him before the sun goes down. My bronc will last as long as his, and from that plate mark in the dirt I can tell whether he's hitting it up, or slowing down." On he went directing his bronc directly over the trail of the horses ahead.

The air stilled, the sky settled to a ominous gray cloud. The sun tried to break through this mist but succeeded only in making a wallow of dim saffron, a hideous light of changing tawny color, the promise of wind.

"See that wind mill flicking, in the light, way off yonder?" asked Bill pointing toward Terry Hopwood's ranch.

"Uh huh," answered Pecos. "What you wanting, boy? You ain't going to send me away from you, is you?"

"Ride over yonder and tell anybody you meet to give you a fresh horse. Maybe you can get a coupla boys to come back with you and pick up my trail. I believe Billito is there and if she arrived they'll know all about me and be set to come here, fast."

"You means I can't ride this out with you?" A hurt look came into the eyes of Pecos.

"Get going, Pecos, and let's run this Spider till his ankles smoke. If I changes my course I'll leave something I'm wearing on a high spot and a sign in the dirt near it which will tell you the route I've taken. Go on, don't fool around now, podner. Spider's sign looks as if we're creeping up on him just as his broncs is beginning to flounder and slow down."

Pecos hurried away silently. Lone Star rode on.

He shuddered as he saw directly in front of him and not more than three miles away the wide expanse of The White Sands.

A sob came into the air, a moan; it was like a being in distress. The glare of the sun vanished. The White Sands could be looked at now, steadily, and at them Lone Star stared.

Two black and bobbing dots on their edge met his vision.

Horses! How he thrilled! Spider and a pack horse! And these were heading directly into the very heart of those terrible white wastes. Just ahead of them arose the mounds of the dunes. Mounds and mounds, and rows of mounds, as far as the eye could see. And those soft swells seemed to beckon, mock and lure; repulse the mind and attract the eye. Into them Spider vanished like a form one sees disappear in a dream. Lone Star felt his heart sink. Spider had gone to his doom; and his path of death would leave never a sign to tell where the feet of his ponies had trod.

Those devilish sands would cheat Lone Star of bringing the human beast ahead to justice.

"No matter," mentally cried Lone Star, "I've got to plow after him; and stay with him, when I get him, until I sees his mouth choking full of that white grit. I gotta go, and keep on going, till I drags him back or sees him down for the last time."

Once more that sob of the air; again that unuttered cry of forlorn distress.

A TINY array of racing spirals of dust rushed out of the sands and danced

along the meadowland. Wind! That awful east wind was beginning to blow. A smother came over the regiments of dunes making them smoke at their crests. The sight was fantastic. The White Sands had begun another of their dreaded creeps and when that storm was over they would be another fifty yards near to the fertile fields of Paradise.

A sough, shriek and then a challenge in the air, sent Lone Star ahead and into that whirlpool of sandy smother. As he rode he managed to tie a wet kerchief over his face and about the head of his tired horse he hung a sopping gunny sack which kept the flying grit from filling the animal's eyes and nostrils. Thirty minutes later he could hardly breathe and yet he knew the wind had not started to show its real caliber.

Once in a while Lone Star chanced to look at the drift of earth-filled air. It was flying southwest. Directed by this he kept boring into the east, boring into the slippery, crawling, lacy mass of drifting sands which told him where the east lay.

Out of the region ahead there came a sound. A sort of whine it was. It was not of the wind, yet somehow it belonged to the storm. Once more it came and then Bill realized what it was. Spider was ahead of him and had taken two wild shots at him! Two shots that sounded like children of the wind.

Where was the fellow? Out came Lone Star's gun in answer to that desperate query. And it barked one, twice, futilely. Even as he fired at a ghostly human form before him he knew that his bullets had gone wide. The shape vanished. The torturing minutes dragged by.

Another sound came out of the howls of the storm. A sort of hideous laughter it was—the whinney of another horse. And this was stifled almost as soon as it was born. Bill's horse made answer. The boy pondered on this. So, Spider was nearby waiting, eh? Very well, he'd have to take a chance. To stop meant death; better to go on and on until he could get a good crack at The Spider and end the chase there. Maybe he could throw a slug into the man's shoulder and knock the fight all out of him while there was yet time to drag him back and into the safety of Paradise Valley.

What magic was this that greeted a peep out from under the kerchief?

Even as he looked a great dune literally disintegrated before him and went sailing off in long streamers of sand, went flying away like endless ribbons of powdery talc. And there, in that maze stood two horses; on the back of the furthest, Spider.

If he could circle a bit. If he could get around Spider. If he could work a way to the left, and then could dab his twine on Spider's upper body, he could then—

HE DECIDED to attempt the difficult feat. He knew that with a rope he was expert, but never in all his life had he thrown a *reata* in such wind; but he turned his horse and headed it away from Spider who was oblivious to Lone Star's proximity.

Now was the time! Out came the lariat, and out went a short snappy loop. Twice it cavorted crazily over the cowboy's head and then it flew into the wind. Out it went, ten, twenty-five feet, and then down it rushed, the noose, now a small snaky thing, the jest of the storm; but just when Bill thought it would strike the head of Spider's horse, or go wide, it settled over the bandit's head, dropped over this and around the man's shoulders. Bill took his dallies, turned his pony and jerked Spider to the sand. The next second Bill and his horse were beside Spider and his bronc.

And while the storm raged and howled and the horses plunged in the maelstrom of dust, the two men fought hand to hand in that tangle of rope, wind, sand, and struggling ponies.

Through some quirk of the storm the wind died, expired as though it had been turned off by a master trickster. And as if fitting to that vast stillness and the emptiness about him, broken only by the crunching feet of the stomping broncs, he felt Spider's fingers at his throat, felt his breath shut off and a booming in his ears.

The cords in his neck and spine seemed to be twisted with appalling force. Insensibility was just off yonder. It was but the split fraction of a second away from him and this meant death. He strove to reach his gun and Spider felt the movement. He loosened a bit the deadly fingers on Bill's throat, and the boy jerked his head away.

"Damn you!" shrieked Spider.

Again the wind shrieked and drowned his voice.

"I'm blind, blind, I tell you!" cried

Spider, "But before this wind fills my gizzard with sand I intends to choke you so's you can't get a pipeful into your lungs."

Spider blind? Bill opened his eyes. The kerchief was gone. His face was now exposed to the fury of the driving grit that bit into his flesh like flying needles or white hot iron filings. Spider blind? One look at those wide, bleary, staring eyes, both lids inflamed and held open, told Lone Star that the The Spider was indeed sightless. But the fingers were once more upon the boy's throat, and this time there were ten instead of five. Spider had gripped him with both his enormous hands.

And exactly as the first crunch of gristle and flesh sounded in Bill's neck, as the digits closed like a snake's coils, Lone Star reached a gun, tilted it, and fired. A roar, a stifling gasping, sob filled his throat, his lungs shot with agony, his head pounded and his heart beat tremendously as he sensed a swift weakness coming up from his legs. Then he seemed to feel those fingers relax; and he knew no more.

An instant later he jerked to sensibility with sand piling up around his face. His body was nearly covered with the finely grained silt. Squirming about from under its weight, he arose to a kneeling posture; to a position where, as he used his hands to lift himself to his feet, he stared into the middle of Spider's back.

Comprehension flashed across his mind. That last conscious act of his had saved his life. The discharge of his revolver had sent a bullet crashing through Spider's side. A pulsing flow of blood was issuing from a wound in the outlaw's shoulder. This was the place of exit of that forty-five ball.

He pulled Spider around, and shuddered at the sight of the wide staring eyes, and the pain retched face.

"Kid," moaned Spider, "I'm done. Get me out of here, and get them horses of mine. Get them, boy, and take us all out. There's a fortune on that pack bronc."

Bill staggered to his feet and reeled to his horse. Steadying himself he reached for his canteen which had been securely lashed to his saddle horn, and drinking some of the water, and bathing his face, eyes and nostrils he revived so that to pick up the reins of Spider's horse and tie these to his bronc was but the work of a few seconds. This done he returned to Spider, lifted the man to his feet, helped him to the canteen and partially revived him with water. At last he got Spider on a horse and tied him there.

Climbing into his own saddle he started with the wind at his back for Paradise. How the storm howled, as though it did not intend Bill to cheat it of its victims; and how the sand piled through the air in driving sheets that felt as though the air were full of sailing strips of thin leather!

The weakened animals could stagger but a few steps at a time, and Spider was scarcely able to hold himself erect in the saddle. After a while he dropped and Bill drew his horse to his side, raised Spider and with an arm under his shoulder held him in this position as he allowed his bronc to take the route back to the valley.

How he got out of those sands he never knew; but he was conscious of voices, of hands that lifted him from his saddle, of the faraway shout of a man, and the whisper of a woman at his ear. Then it seemed that he was in a wagon, yes, he was in a wagon, and its rumble caused him to open his eyes and to cry out, "Whoa! I want to get outa here! I can't go along with you-all! I want to be alongside of The Spider!"

Something wet, cool, and soft touched his face and drooped over his eyes. As though he had dropped into a well the daylight faded, sounds vanished. Then he felt a shiver run along the full length of his frame.

His head rolled sidewise, and a smile curved pitifully the cracked and swollen contour of his lips.

CHAPTER XIII
GLORIOUS DAYS

A WEEK later Bill was able to walk around Terry Hopwood's ranch. He had been confined to his bed for four days, and in his room had met many of the Paradise men now returned from Spider's ranch. And from these had learned that the stolen cattle had been recovered, that many of the outlaws had been killed by Juan's Mexicans and that all of them had been accounted for by capture or death. The range was at last clear of menace, and Paradise was happy. Lone Star Bill was regarded as

the direct cause of these benefactions and Paradise and Eagle Rock had promised to do the proud thing—Lone Star was to receive a ranch stocked and equipped fully, as a reward for his work in running to earth Spider and his crew. At last the congratulations were over, and the Hopwood ranch free to follow its usual quiet. Billito and Bill could now have a bit of peace, could have what they wanted, a long, long talk, all by themselves.

"Come out under this pepper tree," said Billito, "I want to talk, and talk, and talk. I want you to tell me of your last hours on Spider's place, and of your fight with him in the desert. Don't you think I'm curious about this?"

"Honey, let's save that for another time. What's bothering me is, 'how did you get away?' "

"Bill, when I got into the cave I dropped my comb, tore my dress and left those signs in the cave's sandy floor to throw off any of Spider's men who might try to follow me. Then I came here. The boys of Paradise wouldn't allow me to return and so on this place I waited. Oh, how I suffered, for some word of you. Then came Pecos, and after that—— I can see you now as Pecos, Mrs. Hopwood and I first saw you coming out of that sand storm. Think of it, dear, you held onto Spider and brought him out though he must have been dead for at least an hour. But it was better that way. Now you needn't worry over his trial and you can forget him. Tell me, sweetheart, what you did in those terrible holes beneath the adobe."

Lone Star narrated the last few hours he spent in Spider's house and all that had happened before he and Pecos started after Spider. Clearly his narrative was painful to him. Billito saw this and ended it.

"I suppose you want to know of this lawyer Hurley, of El Paso, don't you?" she asked. "Hawk has confessed that The Spider sent him to kill The Lizard. But Hurley convinced Hawk that there was more to be gained by allowing the Lizard to live and by working out a plan to get all of Spider's loot. But they couldn't locate its hiding place.

"Then The Spider became suspicious of The Hawk and detailed Frog to kill him. Frog was allowed to make the fourth member of the crew that had decided to get rid of The Spider. In the Paradise killings Hurley demanded that the signs of The Lizard and The Hawk should be left by the side of each dead man. This was done in order to frighten Spider into confiding to Hurley the secret of his stolen wealth."

"BUT how about that laughter we heard, Billito?"

"Bill, Hawk said that the time Pedro came into The Spider's room, The Lizard was inside the door; it was very thick and hollow, you know. The Lizard opened the panel and exhibited his hand holding a piece of red mud. Then he showed his face. When Spider fell in a fit The Lizard saw a way to make him believe he had seen a ghost. That's why he laughed and that's why we heard all those noises under the floor. Hawk and The Lizard were sure that The Spider would sooner or later break under the spell of his imagination. They thought he'd try for a getaway, alone."

"Did Hawk say who it was that came and took a look at me when I was sleeping in that little room along side of Spider's? I know somebody did, for I seen a burning cigarette."

"Yes, he said that after Spider left The Lizard decided to have a look at Spider's room. He saw you sleeping and at first thought of killing you. But The Lizard decided to let you live until after they had got what they wanted from The Spider. Then he left that note you and Spider found.

"The book of clippings telling of Spider's killings, together with many letters from Hurley are all in the possession of the men at Eagle Rock. There's enough evidence to convict every one that the authorities want to send to prison. You won't have to go to court or bother with any of the trials; and the loot found in Spider's saddle-bags will all go to you. The boys intend this as a wedding present."

"As a what?"

"I want you to tell me again what you told me in Spider's house. My ears are thirsty for just that. Say it slow."

"Shucks, I don't know how to say anything like that; but when a padre asks me something I got sense enough to answer, 'I will,' and 'I do.' Is that what you're a-meaning?"

HOT-LEAD SHOWDOWN

It was hell on wheels that followed Hi Emerson's order—"Get out of town by dawn, or by Gawd, I'll shoot yuh on sight!"

by GUY ARNOLD

CARRYING his suit case, Bill Lucas walked up the main street of Condor City.

October evening was just coming on. The long, rather well built street, not yet lighted up was empty, except that here and there along the chain hitchracks a few scattering teams waited the wills of their masters.

Bill had just gotten off the train. He had never been in the place before. He thought he might stay overnight if he found a cheap room.

After three or four blocks, having seen nothing that appealed to him, he stopped on the corner of a cross street, thinking that if he saw nothing there that interested him he would go back to the station and catch the next train west. He looked up the cross street.

There was no sign of a rooming house, but a block distant an approaching lumber wagon caught his eye.

Drawn by two starveling horses, the old vehicle rattled faintly. A small old man with a long white beard drove. Beside him sat an elderly woman who wore a sunbonnet. The old horses were plodding into a street that crossed the one they had just come down.

Suddenly, from that cross street, a big, blackbearded man spurred into view on a powerful roan. He caught one of the old horses by the bits, then, jumping down,

and rushing back to the side of the wagon which had stopped he said something that Bill didn't hear.

The woman gave a frightened cry. In a loud voice the old man said, "Waters you leave me be. You know I never done no sich a thing. You jist claim that. You made it up. You know it hain't so."

Then things happened with terrible precipitancy.

The big man grabbed the old man by the arm and yanked him out of the spring seat down over the front wheel. The old fellow jerked away, then struck the other in the face.

Like lightning the bully drew a gun and shot three times. The old fellow collapsed. With a piercing wail the old lady half rose from the seat, then fell down into the wagon bed. Frightened by the shots, the old horses threw up their heads as though they would run, but they just ambled forward uncertainly.

Though he looked up and saw Bill watching, the blackbearded man drew a second revolver, which he threw down beside his victim. Then he waited.

Instantly, the main street swarmed. Cowboys, miners, bartenders, waiters, and others came on the run toward the cross street and filled it from curb to curb. Proclaimed by his star and belted gun, the sheriff led. Bill Lucas, still clutching his suitcase, ran beside him.

The sheriff, who had shifty eyes and the face of a lout, looked askance at Bill, as though he didn't want Bill there; and when he and Bill rushed up to within two yards of the murderer, the officer demanded in a voice that only counterfeited sternness. "Tom Waters, you killed this man. Now you up an' tell how it come about?"

Without hesitation the blackbearded criminal offered, "I bumped him to pay for that haystack he burnt for Hi. 'Fore I could think, he drawed that gun lyin' there on the ground by him an' he shot. That there's how near he come to a gittin' me."

Then, holding up the skirt of his coat, he showed a hole in the cloth. Around the hole the cloth was scorched. The hole looked to have been burned with a hot iron, not with a bullet.

But in a loud, hollow, declamatory voice the sheriff said, "an' you shot twicet an' got him?"

"That there is it percisely. You heered three shots. The first one was his'n. The last two was mine."

Without a thought of consequences Bill whirled on the crowd. "This feller lies!" he thundered. "I see the killin'. He fired the three shots hisse'f. Then when the woman fainted an' the team went on, he throwed down that gun hisse'f. He's a liar!"

The sheriff and the murderer shrank, then visibly trembled. Something like a gasp ran through the crowd. Far in the rear a deep lunged fellow lifted up his voice:

"By Gawd, here's a man come to Condor!"

FOR an instant Bill tasted the deep satisfaction which comes to any man when he knows that he has won genuine approval.

Then a very tall man stalked from the crowd. His eyes were like glass. He had a hooked nose which overhung lips that were long and straight and as thin as paper.

He gave Bill just one swift glance that chilled Bill to the marrow; then he took absolute charge of everything and everybody. He did it with little effort, too. In a low, cold voice he said to the sheriff, "Damn' fool, yore business is to 'rest Tom. Do it. Take him to jail. Ef he's guilty of plain murder, he ort to be hung and I'll see that he is hung."

It was precisely as though he had touched a button that controlled everybody.

The sheriff mumbled his formula of arrest. Men came and picked up the dead body. The crowd transfixed for an instant, wheeled in behind the various officers who headed back for Main street and the tall man followed like a herder behind his sheep.

Bill found himself standing alone. He needed nobody to tell him that while he had easily enough called the hands of the loutish sheriff and of the man called Waters, he had inadverently called the hand of a man who was genuinely formidable. That the tall man with the glassy eyes was the real villain behind those two cheap rascals, Bill didn't doubt at all.

His first impulse, not quite unnatural in a man of the most ordinary prudence was to get out of the place quickly as possible. Then, as he realized that the way had been patently left open for him

to do that very thing, he was seized by sudden overwhelming curiosity.

Had he been a stranger in the West, fed up on those marvelous tales which people every hamlet beyond the hundredth meridian with wild men of Borneo he might have taken the situation as regular enough; but Bill was an everyday cowpuncher from the Lower Yellowstone, who had knocked around the cow country all his life. He had heard of places such as this place seemed to be—a place where one big bulldozer had everybody under his thumb and did just as he pleased. And Bill was stubborn. He decided to remain and see just what this big boss would do about it.

He decided that he would go back to Main Street and do a little investigating. So, picking up his suitcase, he followed the now rapidly disappearing crowd.

By the time he got up to the corner, most of the crowd had scattered. The sheriff and his prisoner had vanished. Apparently, the rest of the crowd—in obedience to no ordinary impulse—instead of standing about on the corners to talk of the killing had all vanished into the saloons where they could do their talking covertly.

There was a saloon there on the main street corner. Bill entered. The barroom, a fairly large one was rather crowded and very quiet.

As Bill stepped inside, someone said in an awed voice but very audibly, "Well, I be damned. Lookee. There's that same feller now. Somebody ort to tell him."

Then a very uneasy looking old gentleman, wearing a broad brimmed hat and high heeled boots, beckoned Bill with a finger and led the way down past pool tables to the rear. Bill followed, and, inside of another minute, sitting alone with the old fellow in an otherwise empty poker room, he was listening to what he couldn't quite believe.

The tall man with the glassy eyes was named Hi Emerson. He did run the country around Condor City and had run it for so long that nobody ever thought any more of disputing him. His domination had accrued to him years before.

Two brothers named Guerdes once had disputed his ascendancy. They charged him with rustling. In the presence of more than a hundred men Hi had walked up to the two and had told them that if there was any manhood about them, they would shoot it out with him instead of going to the law. The brothers, both hotheaded fellows and expert pistol shots, had instantly accepted his challenge—then asked him which one of them he wanted to take on first.

"Both at once," he had told them.

They had gone for their guns. Being a little quicker on the draw than he, each of the brothers had drawn and fired ahead of him. One bullet had gone clean through his body, missing his heart only by a few inches. The other bullet had torn through his right side.

As he reeled from those wounds he had killed one of the brothers with a shot through the head; then, as he lay on the ground he had risen on his elbow and killed the other man. He had survived those wounds which would have been fatal to most men; and his mere survival had clothed him with tremendous reputation as a fighting man. Nothing had been done about the killing of the brothers. Hi had killed them in fair fight. Since then everybody had been afraid of him. Nobody had ever really disputed him—nobody but the old fellow whom Waters had killed. The murder was the outcome of a land dispute. That was the way Hi settled it. He controlled the sheriff, among other things. But Hi hadn't counted on anybody like Bill being around to throw a wrench into the machinery.

BILL listened to all that; then he said, "That case, I reckon I'm s'posed to stay around hain't I, for a witness ag'inst this Waters?"

The old man looked sharply out from under the brim of his wide hat, and said, "It 'pears to me, way he looked at you an' never said a word to you nor nobody else 'bout you stickin' around, that he'd jist as soon you would light out. That's why I'm a-talkin' to you, Mister. Looks to me like he meant for you to light out. An' I would."

Aside from mere curiosity as to what would come out of the cowardly crime he had witnessed, there was no reason at all why Bill shouldn't hurry out and take that train. In fact he had reasons of his own for going on that very train. But Bill was stubborn. He decided to stay.

"I'm stayin'," said Bill.

The old man who had been his informant

sighed, then observed, "Course, that's your business. Seein' you aim to stay an' don't know the ropes here 'bout Hi, I reckon I ort to tell you what you're liable to have to look out for."

Then, very warningly he went on, "Course, no matter what Hi wants o' you, you won't have to bump up ag'in' him. He don't have to do his fightin' no more. He's rich now. Got plenty o' fellows to do all his dirty work. But ef you're stayin' should reely make him mad, an' I'm afeared it may, you want to look out for his brother Sam. Sam, he's a whole lot younger'n Hi, 'bout the same size, but he hain't half as smart. He's dead stuck to git to kill somebody an' while he hain't so smart, he's purty slick—too slick to resk killin' you in cold blood even with all Hi's money an' influence back of him. That feller gits up in front o' you anywhere, that feller Sam, you want to be mighty keerful, Mister. Ef he's after you he'll try to pick a fight what'll look to you prob'bly like nothin' worse'n little scrap with fists. You want to dodge that. Don't you try to fight back no matter how he insults you. You try to fight back, he'll be all ready for business. He hain't never shot nobody, but he's pizen fast with a gun jist the same. He'll use his gun on you, you try to fight."

Bill wasn't greatly impressed. That old outworn trick of bullies' was ancient history to him. More than that, he had by this time convinced himself that as far as Hi Emerson was concerned, he could stay in Condor City until he went broke.

"Much obliged, ole feller," he said. "I'll shorely keep my eye peeled for this Sam, an' I see anybody like him lookin' at me I'll be makin' tracks, jist like you say. An' I'll be jist as much obliged ef you'll tell now where I kin find me a room for about foh bits a night."

Miller told him of a little hotel down the street above five blocks. That was the place all the cowpunchers patronized when they were caught in town.

Bill thanked him, picked up his grip and started to go. He started through the crowded barroom. The crowd was thinner along the side of the room opposite the bar. So Bill went down that way, past the ends of pool tables. He had just one more table to pass, when suddenly the crowd in front of him thinned as if by magic, and he heard men running, getting away behind him.

He looked up.

JUST even with the other side of the pool table, stood the man, whom he recognized instantly as the one he had been told to watch for.

This fellow who looked to be about Bill's age was just another Hi Emerson, except that his lips were thick instead of thin. His mouth was long and straight. His nose was hooked. His eyes were glassy like Hi's.

He leered at Bill, and at the same time dropped his right hand to his hip in a movement that might have been entirely innocent, or again might have meant the freeing of a pistol in a holster.

Bill felt his back hair rising a little, but he kept right on, because he half believed the big duffer was only trying to stare him out.

The big duffer had other intentions. When Bill tried to pass him, he jumped squarely in the way and ordered threateningly, "you get the hell outa here. You got jist time to ketch the next train. You ketch that train."

Sam Emerson's chin, just a good reach away, was about on a level with Bill's eyes.

Bill drove a right to Sam's chin with every ounce he could put behind it, and he both felt and heard Sam's jaw break under the blow.

Sam sprawled backward, tried to catch himself, failed, and then crashed backward half way through the big plate window by the door. The gun, which, it was now plain, he had freed in his holster, clattered down on the floor with broken glass.

Bill jumped for the gun and got it. The barroom resounded with exultant yells above which rose the call of that same deep lunged fellow.

"By Gawd, here's a man come to Condor."

Again, but a little vaguely this time, Bill felt the exultation which comes of genuine approval. Bill wasn't at all nervous. Just the same, he now heard in that very approval what his old informant had told him—that the man who bucked Hi Emerson did so at great peril.

Another young man in Bill's place might have made a break for that train. He did think of it as he stood there holding Sam Emerson's gun. But, as he stood there, easy master of the situation, his stubbornness returned, and with it his defiance. He would stay.

Opening Sam's gun he dumped the car-

tridges out on the floor. Then, hoisting his suit case up on the pool table, he proceeded to get his own six-shooter, which, as a peaceable man he seldom carried on his person.

Having armed himself he turned around to give Sam his gun.

Sam, in the meantime, had gotten out of the broken window and gone. Half a dozen grinning fellows now stood between Bill and the broken window. One of them chuckled, "Sho', Mister, he clean forgot his gun. He hain't got nothin' on his mind now but jist to git hisse'f a quill to eat soup with for next two-three weeks. You ort to seen him holdin' up his chin when he went out. Mister you shore made a lamb out o' that boy."

There was something very reassuring about that roughly humorous speech. Then, suddenly escaping his ovation, because the ovation suddenly died of itself, he gave Sam Emerson's sixshooter to a bystander with the request that it be left at the bar, and started anew for the hotel.

This time he reached the hotel.

An old man named Jones ran it. He was a bit striking in a way. His face was both shrewd and benevolent.

He told Bill he could give him a good room. Then, saying that he hadn't been able to get up town, he wanted to know if Bill had heard anything about the shooting.

"Yeah," said Bill, "I see it myself."

Jones looked at Bill in astonishment but said not a word.

That gave Bill a real start, something like the first real start he had as yet experienced. Somewhat hastily he sketched over everything. For this wise looking, noncommittal old man seemed fit to be an adviser if one were really needed.

"Kind o' bad," said Jones, "you didn't go when you had a good chance. But mebbe," he concluded hopefully, "you a-bustin' Sam the way you done will cause Hi to think o' giving you another chance to git away."

"You think, then," Bill asked, "that feller Sam come to see that I went?"

"I dunno's I want to say about that jist now," the old man answered discreetly. "Hain't no mortal rush nohow. Supper's waitin' in there. You go in an' eat your supper. After you've eat, don't you go out o' the house till I talk to you ag'in. Mebbe you're all right to go out on the street an' mebbe you hain't. You go on in an' eat. Time you're through I'll know more'n I do now. I'm goin' up town to find out what I kin."

With that, putting on his hat, he hurried out into the gathering dusk, and Bill went into the dining room.

Several fellows whom Bill knew to be just cowhands like himself were eating their supper. They were deep in discussion of the shooting and none of them looked up at Bill when he came in.

Their table was full, so he seated himself at the one next to theirs. He wanted, of course, to hear what they had to say.

They were all agreed that Tom Waters should be hanged or go to the pen for life. Hi, they said, wouldn't dare do anything now with what was hanging over him about the sheriff. After talking about the shooting, they began to discuss Hi Emerson. Anything that Bill's old informant had forgotten to say about Hi as the most formidable gun fighter imaginable, these fellows remembered and told.

Bill listened and enjoyed his supper moderately. He wondered why he didn't enjoy it more. For he had eaten no dinner that day and the supper was a good one.

By the time he had finished the other men were gone. They were not in the office, evidently having gone up town to hear more about the killing. But there was a woman in the office and when Bill looked at her he knew very well that she was the old lady he had seen in the lumber wagon—Mrs. Mitchell, widow of the game old fellow whom Waters had killed.

Bill didn't make himself known to her.

She wasn't crying, but she looked grief stricken.

He was afraid that if he said anything to her he might make her cry, so he took a chair at the far end of the room.

Pretty soon the wife of old Jones came in. She was a kindly looking old soul, like her husband, but not so wise looking as he. She began to talk to Mrs. Mitchell.

Mrs. Mitchell, bowed over with her arms crossed on her lap, began to tell the story that had led up to the shooting. Her voice trembled now and then, but didn't break. More often it thrilled with pride. Very plainly it eased her grief to talk. All that she talked about was the bravery of her man.

Down at the other end of the room, the

cowpuncher listened to her simple story, and a new prompting came to him.

LIKE most of his promptings it was a bit simple and a bit blind. For it was a prompting to measure himself, not with the cheap lout who had killed the staunch old settler and widowed the brave old woman who was talking, but with the formidable scoundrel behind it all, so that the real culprit should not escape.

Jones came in. His shrewd face was very grave. Coming to Bill he said guardedly, "I mistrusted Hi might have several reasons for wantin' you to go. Now I'm shore he did."

Then putting a hand on Bill's shoulder, he leaned over and explained in the same guarded tone.

Hi, always under suspicion of corrupting the elections for county officers had, in turn, always been noticeably suspicious of all unvouched for strangers. Everybody imagined his reason for being that way was just his fear that any stranger might turn out to be a state official sent to get evidence of his political crookedness. That Hi had been guilty of stuffing ballot boxes at the last election, nobody doubted at all. The present sheriff couldn't have been elected without that sort of thing. If that sort of thing could be proved on Hi, the state authorities who paid no attention to his local reputation would go right after him and send him to the pen.

Jones had gotten it so straight from men who really knew that he couldn't doubt. Hi, with dread of the pen hanging over him, always suspicious of everybody, believed that Bill was the long expected spotter come to get the evidence which would undo him.

"That's why," said Jones, "that he wanted you to go of yourself. That's why he sent Sam after you when you didn't go. He ain't worried any about Waters. He'd probably help hang Waters if it'd help him to do it. It's this other. Now, seein' you put Sam out o' business an' stayed, you goin' to have Hi himself on your hands. None of his other men will be game to take you on after what you done to Sam. An' let me tell you, Mister," he concluded impressively, "while I don't reckon he's quite all ever'body says he is, they is no doubtin' he's an awful dangerous man. I see him kill the Guerdes boys. I see him stand in the blaze o' their guns with their bullets tearin' through his body; an' them glassy eyes o' his'n never batted whilst he peered through their smoke; and that thin mouth o' his'n never showed a sign of flinchin' till both them boys was dead. An' then he laughed; an' he tole us that even ef ary o' the boys had shot him through the heart, as one of 'em nearly did, he'd 'a' killed 'em jist the same. I reckon that was jist talk Mister, but lemme tell you: ef any human man could do that, I be'lieve Hi Emerson's the one.

"Now then"—and the old man's shrewd face filled with sombre warning—"I hain't tryin' to skeer you. But I want you to think. That time Hi didn't have very much to fight for. He was young, then. He could have got away ef he'd wanted to and got himself a start sommer's else. Now it's different. He's rich now. He's got a lot to fight for. More'n that, Mister, he thinks you're here to git the evidence for what he knows he cain't start to fool with. An' you called his play this morning. Now I don't want to stampede you. They hain't no use in that. Hi's mean an' crooked an' domineerin' a man, I reckon, as ever lived, but he hain't no fool. Ef you git away in the mornin', first train, I'd mightly near gamble that he'd be tickled to death to have you go. He'll never bother you either onless you're here in the mornin' after the first train's gone. So, while I'm tellin' you this to make you think straight, you jist take it easy. But for God's sake don't take it so easy as to forgit what I've said. When it's time for you to git up an' ketch that train, I'll call you. An' now, ef you don't mind me a-seemin' to run your business I wisht you'd let me show you up to your room. More'n that, you ort to stay in your room. I'm a-tellin' you that I think he will keep his shirt on till after that mornin' train. But with what's weighin' on him, when you didn't leave at the first chance, an' then knocked Sam out when he sent Sam to you, no tellin' what notion might come into his head ef he sees you anywhere along the street, or ef he come prowlin' by here an' see you sittin' in the office."

None of this apparently, was lost on Bill. Perhaps, after all, it would be better for him to go.

FOLLOWING the old man's lead, he went up to his room and assured him that when it was time to get up for that morning train he would be ready to get up and catch it.

But old Jones had hardly left the room and Bill hadn't started to pull off his boots, when thought of Mrs. Mitchell and her brave old husband came to Bill.

Then Bill forgot all about his boots, and he forgot all about bed, and all about that train. And he sat there by the little dinky table, his lean, brown face in a way darkly forbidding as Hi Emerson's, and his rather fine gray eyes fixed in a stare as glassy as Hi's own. Bill was stubborn. He'd stay. He'd see it through.

It was only a little after seven when Bill seated himself there in his room. It was after midnight before he stirred.

Then he pulled off his boots and lay down on the bed without taking off his clothes. In the pool hall he had put on his revolver, a long and heavy one, in a holster. He didn't take off the holster or remove the gun from it. He just shoved the holster up toward the middle of his belt so that it wouldn't bother him.

But, though he lay down, he didn't go to sleep. In a little while, getting up off the bed, he went over to the table, and in the light of the lamp which he hadn't yet turned out he very carefully examined his weapon.

It was nearly two before he lay down again. This time he dozed off.

At about five—for the train was an early one—old Jones came to call him.

By that time Bill was sleeping soundly. He was a long time rousing then, still half asleep, he answered, "All right. I'm comin'."

But he wasn't coming, fore he wasn't awake. He dozed off again.

Then old Jones, who realized the gravity of Bill's situation, redoubled his knocking, and that time really awakened him.

And this time Bill answered, broad awake, "No, I reckon I hain't a-goin' Mister. I done thought a heap about this last night after we talked. From what you tole me, this Hi, he's skeered o' me. It's jist a accident he's got that way. He hain't no reason ef he only knowed it. But sence he is that way I reckon I'll try to do somethin' 'bout it. Don't reckon I could ever look nobody in the face ag'in, ef, havin' the aidge on that feller, I would go off an' leave him to rob that pore ole widder an' git clean away from the killin' o' that good ole man."

Then, getting up he opened the door.

Old Jones stood thunderstruck. He looked searchingly at Bill. When he had looked he said, "I reckon that they hain't no man in this country but has said that sometime Hi would meet his match. An' I know that everybody has wished it, too. Mebbe you're that feller come at last."

Bill didn't say anything. He was pulling on his boots. Jones waited, standing just inside the room. When Bill was ready they went down into the office.

Old Jones turned out the lights, saying, as he did so, "He'll be watchin' for you at the depot. When he sees you don't come, he'll be driftin' down this way. With the lights on he might shoot you through a winder."

Bill didn't want to sit in the office. Like a man waiting for a train, he was fidgety, nervous. He said he would rather sit outside.

Old Jones, who was a cool man, congratulated him, "You hain't afeared then no matter how you feel. You was afeared you wouldn't want to go out to meet him. You'd want to hide."

Then he led the way outside and they sat on the bench by the doorway.

It was dark out there, for, because of the season, day did not come at this early hour.

They sat there not talking at all, just waiting.

In a little while the train whistled in at the other end of town; then, a little later whistled out.

That was the train on which Bill was supposed to go.

SHORTLY afterward day began to come. Then after a little while, they could see far up the street.

Suddenly, from up that way, came the sounds of a crowd—the stamping of boots on frosty sidewalks and the murmur of voices. Simultaneously, far up, in the middle of the street, a solitary figure appeared. Then, on the walks, each side began to show black with men.

Hi Emerson was coming.

The cowpuncher from Lower Yellowstone had never fought a gun battle. He had seen a few, though, and he had

always been certain that he would never have one of his own. They had always seemed to him useless. He had never seen one that he was sure, could not have been avoided; and always they were monstrous things full of hate and of death.

For an instant he sat there on the bench, pale and a little afraid. But Bill was stubborn. He had stayed—he would fight.

He gripped his gun and rose to his feet. He moved out into the middle of the street and slowly, but steadily, advanced toward Hi.

Hi came on a little faster.

Bill didn't alter his gait. He moved slowly, steadily—more like a man in a dream, than one moving under the black doubtful shadows of mortal combat which, in some men, breeds panic.

Whether it was Bill's deliberation, or whether it was because he had more to lose, more to be afraid of—he must have believed that at last he was confronted by some secret officer of the state—Hi came on faster and faster, as though the pressure of all that weighed on him was a little too great for him to bear.

When only seventy-five yards separated the two men, Hi stopped, aimed deliberately, and fired. His old time marksmanship seemed to be with him. His bullet whipped the tail of Bill's coat.

Then, as if that close shot, which was yet a miss, either encouraged him to recklessness, or frightened him with thought that he might miss again, the redoubtable gunman came on at a run. And as he came, he fired.

Bill didn't hurry. He walked slowly, as before, and he held his fire.

Not until they were within thirty yards, safe range for him to risk a shot did Bill pause to aim. He wasn't hit, though Hi had fired repeatedly. Bill aimed deliberately.

HI, too, had stopped. He stood with an attitude of tremendous threat. His eyes were like glass. His long, thin mouth was cruel as death itself. His right arm was extended full length, and he held his long revolver, steady as a rock, at Bill.

To Bill there was certain death in that gun. But it didn't hasten him into stampede. When he was ready he let go.

With a bullet through his heart Hi crumpled down; and the gun, which, due to the too great pressure of all that was weighing on him, he had emptied, but with which he had hoped to bluff and win, just as he had always done, snapped harmlessly and fell to the ground.

Then, along the sidewalks the air was suddenly filled with hats and with exultant yells, while the voice of that deep lunged fellow rose in what Bill now knew was the very heart cry of the town:

"By Gawd, here's a *man* come to Condor!"

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AUG. ISSUE NOW ON SALE

REAL WESTERN

BILL ON TWILIGHT

by GIL GILRAIN

Bullets fly fast and furious when outlaws start trouble with quick shooting buckaroos.

"MY gosh!" ejaculated Old Man Benson of the Q Bar B rancho, looking up gloomily from a letter he had just now opened. "I guess I might just as well start up a dude ranch here and turn out the cattle to graze on the highway and turn in the tourists to trample all the crops. We got ANOTHER guest coming out this way—"

Young Bill Benson yawned wearily.

"I hope he ain't like that boob we entertained last summer who shot them two sheep dogs mistaking them for coyotes!" said Bill, a slow grin of remembrance breaking over his bronzed face. "He was—"

"This ain't a 'he' that's coming this time, son," said Old Man Benson, adjusting his spectacles and returning a bit sadly to the letter. "This is Miss—Miss Molly Dee—19 years old—daughter of James C. D. Dee, a feller I went to school once with back in—"

Young Bill Benson stopped yawning suddenly.

"When is she coming?" he asked, anxiously.

"Be here the twelfth," read the older man, grimly.

"Why, that's tomorrow!" exclaimed Bill, excitedly. "I expect I'd better arrange to take the buckboard and meet her at Conifer. I can just hitch up that pair of roan colts—"

But if Bill expected any encouragement he didn't get it.

"I say," he repeated, somewhat louder, "I guess I had better take the roan colts and go down to the train and meet her!"

Old Man Benson stopped in the act of opening another letter.

"I'll attend to meeting her," he said, sharply. "I seem to recollect I told you to help the boys round up a few steers tomorrow!"

Bill's face fell at that remark.

"But you told me that before you got the letter," he protested.

"The order still stands," said Old Man Benson, and he opened his second letter. A moment later he tossed it to Bill.

"Here's a letter from Sheriff Dawson at Durango and he encloses a picture you might be interested in—even if it ain't a girl. If you could land that guy, with a price on his head—"

Bill glanced at the letter. It read:

"Dear Benson—
Not having a deputy up your way want to ask you to keep an eye open for the party whose mug appears on the enclosed circular. Note the reward. He is supposed to be around these parts somewheres. Thanks.
Sheriff Dawson."

The circular was a bit more explicit. It showed a photograph of a tough looking customer who looked to be a cross between a grizzly bear and a gorilla, all shaggy whiskers, bushy eyebrows and tumbled locks. Above the picture were the significant words: "FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD" and below the picture was the name of the distinguished gentleman—"Chop" Glotz—and the customary description and the fact that he was wanted for train robbery in Southern Colorado, a postoffice robbery in Utah, a murder in New Mexico, rustling in Wyoming, and horse stealing in Texas.

"This man," read the circular, "is dangerous and must be taken by surprise if he is captured alive."

Bill Benson stared at the picture for a full minute.

"He has funny eyes," he said aloud. "I wonder what color eyes she has? I wonder if she's a blond? I hope so. Maybe she—"

"You forget about that gal and get out after them steers in the morning, come sunup," admonished Old Man Benson, severely. "You can keep a eye out for that bird Glutz or whatever his name is. I'll take the buckboard in for Miss Dee myself, by George!"

But, lo and behold, when Old Man Benson went out next morning to get the buckboard it wasn't there. Neither were the roan colts in their stalls. One Duck, the Chinese cook, answered the old man's question as Benson had expected.

"Ya—Beel—he go town with buck wagon," said One Duck, impressively. "He take two boy along to help heem. He take bad hoss—Twilight—an' plenty um wild keow—spotted keow—blingle keow—white face keow—plenty—lots—too much keow!"

"You're crazy!" said Old Man Benson, indignantly.

But had Old Man Benson been five miles down the road toward Crows Crossing he would have decided that Bill Benson was the party who was insane and not poor old One Duck. It was as the Chinaman had reported—Bill was headed for the railroad with a team of fidgety, half-broken roan colts hitched to a buckboard, and anchored to the tail of the buckboard was a snorting, wild-eyed cayuse known in more than one Colorado rodeo as "Twilight," an outlaw bucker. Immediately behind Twilight came a puffing, motley assemblage of longhorn steers and cagey cows of assorted colors under the escort of two swearing and sweating cowboys, who were about ready to quit.

"Hey, Bill!" called one of these, finally, "you got to tell us what kind of hokuspokus is coming off afore we drive these crazy critters another mile! We figger you're outta your head—"

Bill pulled up on the roans. The strange parade halted.

"I'm enough outta sorts to come out o' this contraption and give you two hombres a blamed good licking," said Bill shortly. "We're heading towards Crows Crossing meaning to be there when the train from Denver stops there for water, that's all—"

"But it's a passenger train," said a cowpoke. "You can't ship cattle on a

passenger train, as far as I ever heard!"

Bill Benson's handsome face clouded.

"Listen, idiot, who said anything about shipping cattle?" he demanded, hotly. "There's a young lady on that train that I aim to take off at Crows Crossing, afore the train can reach Conifer—"

The cowboys looked at each other in consternation.

"What's the idear of bringing us and a law-abiding bucking hoss and a lot of innercent cows along to help deduct a female?" demanded the other hand, plaintively. "I'm agin that sort of thing!"

"I ain't deducting no female," said Bill, with blistering sarcasm. "But I'll be deducting several of your front teeth and a patch of hide offen both of you if you try any tricks on me. I'm going to take the girl to the ranch. She's coming to visit us."

"What are we bringin' a bunch of cows down to meet her fer?" asked the first cowboy, suspiciously. "I never heard tell of such a thing!"

"And a bucking hoss?" echoed the other, incredulously. "You can't tell me she's going to ride back to the ranch on Twilight—for if you do tell me that I'll call you a blasted liar if I die for it!"

"Listen, you ivory-headed walking sticks," said Bill, as his face reddened. "This gal is a daughter of one of paw's old school chums. I got to be different. I got to give her a welcome to this part of Colorado that she'll write home about. I got a plan—"

"Talk loud so the cows can get it, then," said a cowboy. "I know they're as curious as we are about it all. You was saying—?"

"I got a plan," said Bill. "The train stops at Crows Crossing for about three minutes. I mean to leave you two boys and the buckboard down in the gully where you can't be seen from the train. Then I'm mounting Twilight and hazing this bunch of crazy-quilt cattle right straight at the train—whooping and hollering—with old Twilight bucking to beat the band. When we reach the train——"

The cowboys laughed suddenly.

"You mean when Twilight reaches the train—with an empty saddle!" suggested one, grinning.

"When WE reach the train," continued Bill, "I'm calling out a greeting something along this line 'Yoo-hoo, Miss Molly Dee'—that's her name, fellers—and when she pokes her head outta the car winder I'll sweep off my hat and holler 'Welcome to the Q Bar B rancho—git off here and we'll escort you home pronto!' She'll get off, entranced by the wild and woolly Western welcome, and then you two will appear with the buckboard——"

The cowboys grunted skeptically.

"We should have a ambulance to care for you," said one. "You'll bite off your tongue if you try to talk while riding Twilight——"

"We should have a straightjacket for the gal—if she's silly enough to get off a train in the midst of you, a wild bronk and a bunch of bawling, stampedin' cattle," suggested the other cowhand.

But Bill Benson wasn't easily discouraged. He reached in a pocket for his package of "tailor-mades" and when he brought it out a folded piece of paper came with it. Bill examined the paper curiously, at first, then ruefully. It was the circular on "Chop" Glotz that had come in the preceding day's mail. Bill thrust it back in his pocket hastily. Then he signaled the caravan.

"Let's go!" he bawled out and he touched one of the roan colts with the whip. It went instantly. So did the other colt. The start was so swift that the buckboard groaned and threatened to part in the middle. Old Twilight, the bucker, was almost jerked off his wicked hoofs. The bawling cows and steers started up, excited, and the two cowhands swore as they followed, choking on dust and consternation. Young Bill, they decided, was sure out of his head—but it was his funeral, not theirs, after all.

"Too bad we can't bring along a coupla buffalos, a herd of war-bonneted Apaches and a prairie fire," groaned one.

"It's bad enough as it is," declared the other cowboy, sadly.

And he was right. It was a sorry looking outfit that halted in the arroyo west of the water tank at Crows Crossing some two hours and twenty minutes later. The cowboys glared darkly at Young Bill and he wasn't as immaculate in dress as he had been when he had pulled out of the Q Bar B with his traveling rodeo. Further, his temper wasn't so good. He scowled thoughtfully.

"We got a hour to wait for that train," he remarked.

"We can use it nice," said a cowhand, wearily. "We can git these cows lined up in a row and start teaching them to wag their tails all in unison, further impressing th' lady—"

But Bill was worrying over something else.

"I wonder if I can ride that Twilight hoss long enough to git from here to meet that train on that track yonder?" he asked, awkwardly. "The critter ought to be tired after the long trip. I want him to buck right up to the Pullman winder so I can welcome Miss Molly Dee with a smile and a shout—"

"A pain and a groan, you means!"

"A gasp and a flop, more likely!"

"You birds are just dumb, that's all," said Bill, hotly. "You got no imaginations. I'm different. I can figure things out. Miss Dee is going to be impressed —"

"With our gentleness as we lifts your unconscious hulk from the dust bank where Twilight has deposited you," said one of the cowboys, maliciously. "What are we to tell her was wrong with you? Firewater, sun stroke, or what?"

"I'll do all the talking that's done," said Bill, quietly.

Then, with dignity, Bill examined the saddle strapped on the outlaw Twilight's back. It was snug. Twilight looked tired. The angry lustre that generally marked his rolling eyes was gone. Bill began to whistle hopefully—and at that minute the Denver train whistled for the curve half a mile west of the water tank.

"Hey!" cried Bill, "one of you galoots grab this team here. I'm grabbing Twilight. The other one of you help me mount this hoss. After that help hustle them cows out towards the track—come on—hurry—that train will be here in a second or two!"

There was a great commotion. The roans reared and plunged as the preparations began. Bill finally got astride Twilight with the aid of one of the whooping hands. A second later, as Twilight began to unpack a few of his bucking tricks the cows were aroused and headed for the track, out of the arroyo—and the Denver train, hissing and panting after the long upgrade, came sliding up to the water tank at Crows Crossing.

"Whoopee!" cried Bill, as he bobbed up and down in the rocking saddle on Twilight. The vari-colored steers and cows stampeded this way and that. Scores of white, anxious faces began to appear—pressed against the Pullman car window. There was only one Pullman car on the train. It had an observation platform. And there was a girl on the observation platform. All this Bill saw as his neck cracked—and cracked—as Twilight really got into action. Twilight wasn't near as tired as Bill had figured. He plunged forward in a series of stiff-legged, jack rabbit hops—and each time he went up Bill felt seasick—and each time he came down Bill felt like the earth was crumpling under the vicious hoofs.

The train crew stood aghast for a second at the sight.

"He's drunk!" said the engineer and that broke the spell. The engine crew got busy tanking up the water. But the passengers—"

"He'll be killed!" cried an excited old lady.

"He's abusing that horse!" said another.

"What is he hollering about—we can't help him!" said another.

But Bill wasn't hollering for help—exactly. He was trying to remember the pretty little presentation speech that he had made up with which to present himself to Miss Molly Dee. All he could remember now, however, as he swayed dizzily on Twilight's undulating back, was "Whoopee" and he managed to get that out three times in loud if undignified succession. He was managing to hang on to Twilight, although not according to rodeo rules. He was clinging to the saddle horn in desperation—and every second the angry outlaw was threatening to pitch him into Kingdom Come.

There was a haze before Bill's eyes now. With each jump of the bucker Bill's teeth clicked. He didn't dare risk trying to say "Welcome, Miss Molly Dee" for fear of biting the end off his tongue. The spotted, splotched, striped and mottled steers and cows had long since scuttled to one side. Old Twilight went into a sudden series of particularly nasty twistings and squirmings and the world began to swim before Bill's clouded eyes. Nevertheless he thought he saw the girl on the observation platform wave at him. He remembered his hat. He reached up to snatch it from his head to salute her—and at

that second the disgusted engineer blew the whistle, Twilight took a tremendous side hop—and Bill, clinging only to his hat, sailed majestically through the air.

He struck the railing of the observation platform, balanced there the brief fraction of a second, and then tumbled over it and on to the platform. He arose almost instantly, however, his crushed sombrero still in hand, a weak smile on his startled face.

"Hello, kid!" he said, attempting to bow low to the sole occupant of the platform. "Welcome to—welcome to—"

"Sir?"

The haughty tone acted on him like a bucket of cold water. He straightened up, blinking, flushing.

"Molly—it's me!" he cried, hastily.

"Don't you molly me, you fresh upstart!" cried the lady, and she gave him a slap that sent him spinning sideways. "I declare I never saw such nerve! And all the trouble you went to in order to light on this platform to start a flirtation! Why, you brazen creature, I'll—"

But Bill Benson was no fool. He didn't wait for lightning to strike twice in the same place. His cheek still smarted. He darted into the car, stumbling this way and that as the car lurched with increasing speed. In a second he was in the Pullman aisle, headed nowhere in particular but anywhere to get away from the lady in pursuit. A man blocked his passage. Bill collided with him—none too gently—and they both went down in a heap. But Bill was on top. And when his head cleared Bill found himself seated on the other gentleman, who was saying things no gentleman should ever say in a Pullman in the presence of ladies.

"Whew!" said Bill, dazedly. "I'm kind of dizzy!"

And then he realized that he was staring right into the horrified face of a very beautiful young lady in the seat not three feet from his blinking eyes. He was immediately contrite.

"Madam, am I sitting on your husband?"

But the girl only continued to stare and look frightened.

"I am sorry," said Bill, recovering his breath and his presence of mind simultaneously. "I didn't see your husband. I fell over him. A young lady out on the platform was after me—I guess she didn't know who I was—and—and—"

Bill stooped to help the fallen man to his feet.

"He—he isn't my husband!" gasped the girl, finally.

"Then I'm mistaken," said Bill, politely. "I thought—" He stopped in amazement as he saw the face of the man on whom he had been sitting. Where had he seen that face before? Whose face was it? Twilight's? No, Twilight wasn't on the train. They didn't allow horses on a passenger train. Who—where—and then the light dawned on Bill. He let out a wild whoop.

"Hello, Glotz!" he cried, with delirious delight. "How the heck are you? I'd know those eyes of yours in my sleep! What did you do with the mattress—have it shaved off? Aw, lay down there—I'm sitting on you again—until we get to Conifer. And don't try no foolishness or I'll crack you one—"

Glotz subsided. It was the natural thing to do with Bill Benson's 180 pounds on top of him. Bill looked up at the girl.

"I'm sorry to butt in so near your reservation in the car," said Bill, in his most polished tone. "But this man is an outlaw, wanted for several trifling matters. I aim to keep him until we get to Conifer. We'll get off there. I live on a ranch near there. The young lady on the back platform—who swatted me when I spoke to her—is getting off there, too. But I won't speak to her again until somebody—maybe the station agent—introduces us properly. She's Miss Molly Dee of Philadelphia and she ain't used to—"

The pretty girl in the seat started up.

"Why, I'm Miss Molly Dee of Philadelphia!" she exclaimed. "My dear boy, are you Mr. Benson's son?"

"That's me—sure!" cried Bill and jumped up.

"Why, you poor, dear boy," began Miss Dee. But she got no further. There was an explosion from Bill as he reached down and grabbed the squirming Mr. Glotz, who was wiggling up the aisle.

"This bird is dearer than I am, Miss Dee!" cried Bill. "He's worth five hundred dollars delivered to the sheriff in Durango and I'm going to see that he is delivered. Lay down Glotz, and be quiet. That's the boy. Now, Miss Dee, if you'll pardon me for interrupting you. I want to simply say this—welcome to Crows

Crossing—that is—well, I guess we passed Crows Crossing—that is where I got on—so I'll say welcome to Conifer. We'll get off there, just us three—and I'll rent a livery hack—"

"Oh," said Miss Dee, clasping her hands, "that'll be lovely!"

"I'll say," said Bill, heartily, and then he looked from the pretty dimpled blond Miss Dee to the red-faced Mr. Glotz and then back again to Miss Dee. "And say, Miss Dee—or Molly—if I may call you that—isn't it wonderful out here in the West—with me—and me with $500 reward money coming—and—and—say, do you believe in love at first sight?"

But just then the train whistled for Conifer.

"Come on, Molly," said Bill, generously, "you can answer that question later. Come on, Glotz—we're getting off here!"

Glotz swore—but Molly and Bill, looking into each other's eyes, didn't hear him at all.

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KILL THAT SHEEPHERDER!

SHEARIN' SHEEP IS TROUBLE, DON'T EVER LET NO ONE TELL YUH DIFFERENT

by **BRIAN LOOMIS**

THE Spring of 1916 promised the longest shearing season on record, and as usual, me an' Owen Davis booked our dates together. We were to start bendin' our backs in "Dad" Shipman's corral on the Rattlesnake in southern Arizona in January, an' we arranged our bookin's so's not to lose any but travelin' time till we wound up the season in George Buell's corral on the Blackfoot up in Idaho some time in July. To anybody who's ever been called upon to shear sheep it will be plumb clear that we'd give ourself some job. But we had dreams of a perfect shearin' season; not less'n a hundred an' fifty days. The reason for undertakin' a long stretch o' that kind can be explained by quotin' a letter I got from Owen just before Christmas.

It's a peculiar fact about sheep-shearers that after the shearin' season they simply seem to disappear from the face o' the earth, but the next Spring they bob up again as fresh as daisies. An' although I'd sheared side by side with Owen Davis for five Springs it was a peculiar fact that I didn't know a single thing about his life the other seven or eight months of the year. The only connectin' link between us was that he knew my address, me bein' permanently located in a pool-hall in a little town not far out o' Pocatello when I wasn't gatherin' in the mazuma by the crick in my back.

I didn't have to shear sheep, for my pool-hall was a nice payin' little business, but every time I'd git that annual letter from Owen I'd arrange to hire a feller to take my place an' git ready to make a human question mark outa my back-bone. You see, while I'm not a longstriker I can average my hundred an' twenty-five sheep a day, an' you can see that at fourteen cents a fleece I can afford to hire a man in the pool-hall for three dollars a day.

Here, then, is the letter I got from Owen word for word except that I ain't givin' him

away by namin' even the state it was sent from:

"Dear Bill:

"How do you feel about going the whole route from the Rio Grande to the Bitter Roots this Spring? I've got to do it. I've been a careless cuss, Bill, when I wasn't shearing, and never saved any money like you done. To cut it short, old pal, I've got to raise five thousand dollars by the first of August or—I won't bother you about that. Shearing is the only way I've got to make money.

"You maybe think it can't be done, Bill, but I've got it figured out almost to a cent. By going the whole route I ought to get in a hundred and fifty days. Men are scarce this Spring so it will be a long run and we'll get fourteen cents a fleece or better. Board will be a dollar a day. I figure I can keep my expenses down to four hundred dollars by being a tight-wad.

"Now, Bill, you know my record. Take it day in and day out nobody has ever beat me shearing wherever we've worked. Of course there's faster ones than me for a day, but for the whole season I strike two hundred more days than I miss. I once sheared two hundred and thirty-five sheep in ten hours. I figure I can do two hundred *every* day and more some days in order to average two hundred and ten every day for a hundred and fifty days. That'll be forty-four-hundred dollars, leaving me four thousand clear of expenses.

"That leaves me a thousand dollars short yet. Now listen, Bill: Here's where I'm going to make it up. A big sheep association is offering a thousand dollar prize to the shearer who shears the most sheep during the entire season based on regular shearing corral tallies. If I can make an average of two hundred and ten a day, honestly, Bill, do you think there's a shearer can beat it? *I've simply got to have that bonus.*" Owen.

Considerin' the quiet, unassumin' kind of a cuss Owen is, them underscored words meant a lot. If he could average two hundred an' ten sheep every day he sheared I didn't doubt he'd win the prize, but I'm givin' it to you straight—I didn't think he could do it.

Sheep-shearin' is a funny thing. They tell me that back East, or over in Europe, if a shearer gits fifty head a day he holds a celebration. Out here the shearer that can't git a hundred is considered a bum. From a hundred to a hundred and fifty is a mighty good average, but there are a few long-strikers who can git two hundred a day or better. An' once in a while one o' these two hundred strikers will hump himself over a bunch o' bare-bellies an' go away above that figger. I've heard of men shearin' above three hundred a day—but I never met 'em, though I don't say it can't be done with the right kind of weather an' the right kind o' sheep.

Sheep-shearin' is *labor,* an' you can't make nothin' else out o' it. There you are in a slippery pen with your back bent like a rainbow, holdin' on to a squirmin', loose-hided piece o' animated mutton with one hand, makin' him set up an' look purty while you try to cut the wool off'n him with the other without takin' too many mutton chops out o' the live carcass. Just one day's shearin' an' the wool grease that soaks into your clothes will make 'em stand alone. Nice job!

WHATEVER it was made Owen Davis need that five thousand dollars was purty darn serious—I saw that the first time I laid eyes on him. There was a grim look in his eyes, an' a slant to his jaw that had never been there before.

We met at Dad Shipman's corral as usual, an' before we'd touched a fleece I see that things wasn't goin' to be easy for my side-kick. There were other longstrikers out for that thousand dollar bonus.

The main obstacle at our corral was a big, husky Dane by the name of Chris Jensen, a big guy who would tip the beam at two-twenty. Before we'd been on the ground half an hour it was evident that Jensen had established himself as the camp bully.

The feller was a "Sanpeter," which among shearers expresses a lot. By way of explanation let me say that Sanpete is a place down in central Utah that was mostly settled by Danes an' Swedes. People say that for years they used to use carrots as the medium of exchange. I got nothin' against the Danes. Most of 'em are mighty good people, but when you do find a bully among 'em he's sure a bear. Anyway, the shearers that come from Sanpete are as clannish a bunch as you'll ever find, an' when they find they can ride somebody they ride 'em to death.

Jensen has a bunch with him; not all of whom are shearers. There's a good sprinklin' o' wranglers an' wool-jammers. The head wrangler is Pete Jensen, a cousin to Chris. The only reason he ain't the bully is because him an' Chris have had it out between 'em, an' found that Chris was the best man. Then there was another cousin to 'em, a guy named Larsen, who done the grindin' for the corral.

Our mix-up with the Sanpeters occurs at once.

Owen goes up to Dad Shipman's an' says:

"Any objection to us takin' the two pens nearest the end o' the chutes?"

"None at all," Dad says. "Help yourselves."

We'd no more than climbed into the pens to git ready when Pete Jensen, the head wrangler, comes a-snortin' up.

"Hey, you guys," he yells, "them pens is pre-empted by Chris Jensen an' his side partner. Git outa there."

It was bluff pure an' simple because Dad Shipman had just told us we could have 'em. I looked to Owen to assert himself for I knew he come of a fightin' breed, an' he had a hundred an' ninety pounds o' bone an' muscle to back up his assertions. But he just stood there, half-hesitatin' until big Chris comes to back up his claim in person.

"Git outa there," big Chris roars.

Owen steps back an' sizes him up. His fists clinch an' a sort of a film seems to come over his eyes like I've seen before when he got good an' mad. I look for him to land one on the Dane's jaw. Jensen scowls an' comes on with them big fists a-swingin'. The fight didn't come off. Owen simply jumps over the fence an' starts away.

"Take 'em," he says. "It don't make no difference. There's a pen for every shearer, I reckon."

A sheep couldn't have acted more humble. It was as near to runnin' from a fight as a man could come. Worst of it was every shearer, wrangler, an' wool-jammer was there to see Owen back water.

"I don't want to see you birds in this end o' the shed again," Chris Jensen fires after us.

Me? What could I do? When I fatten up in the Winter time I don't weigh a hundred an' fifty, an' I'm no fighter, nohow. I simply tagged along after my pardner. We passed Dad Shipman, an' the old man looks at Owen kinda funny.

"You fellers can take the pens in the other end of the shed," he says coldly.

"Why didn't you call that bird, Jensen?" I asks Owen as quick as we're alone.

The big feller twists up his face like he's in pain, an' for a minute that film seems to drift over his eyes.

"I dassn't, Bill," he says. "I got to win that prize an' every day counts. If me an' Jensen mixes it's just about a cinch that both of us will quit workin' for a spell."

I LET it go, for it sounded reasonable in a way, but all the same I knew there was somethin' else back of it, an' I hated to think that my pal was a plain coward. I didn't.

That was the beginnin' of a persecution that got worse every day. That Sanpete crowd never let up on us a minute after that, an' furthermore they cut down Owen's tally every day. Losin' that end pen cost him at least ten fleeces every day. To some people a sheep is a sheep, but there's just as much difference in their dispositions as there is in people, an' it all crops up in shearin' time.

Let me explain. The herd is coralled in a big pen in the back, an' then filtered through smaller corrals an' chutes till they git to the chute where the wranglers fill the shearer's little pens in the shed. There's no front to the shearers' pens, but as it's always a sheep's inclination to go back that don't bother. When the fleece is off a sheep the shearer just gives it a kick out into the middle o' the shed where the fleece wranglers tie it up, an' then the fleeces are collected by the wool-jammers an' sixty or seventy of 'em are tramped into a wool sack.

When a shearer has his pen all sheared the wranglers open the gate in the back, throw it across the first chute for a gate, an' haze the sheared ones into a second chute where the owner brands 'em down at the end of it an' they pass out into another big herd corral. But the point I'm bringin' out is that every sheep had to pass by Chris Jensen's pen, an' whenever Pete saw a barebelly, meanin' a sheep that's had the wool all scratched off its belly an' sides on the brush, an' so don't have more than half the surface to shear, he'd pick it up an' throw it in to Chris. Pen after pen would be filled an' by the time they got down to us there wouldn't be nothin' left but the wrinkled sheep or the stubborn ones that had fought past every dodge gate to the last.

It is a cinch that any old biddy who can fight her way past twenty-five or thirty dodge gates is goin' to object plumb strenuous against bein' disrobed by a stingin', singin' Stewart shearin'-machine. It works out that way. You can set a docile sheep up on end an' it stays there doin' nothin' no worse than lookin' reproachful, but you take a hundred pounds o' mutton that's—— bent to git away with the wool on an' they can wear a man to a frazzle. An' as I say Pete Jensen always contrived to give Owen most of the "wrinklies," that kind with the rows o' dew-laps flappin' so that you have

to hold your critter with your knees while you use one hand to stretch out the wrinkles an' shear with the other. That's why I say that Pete Jensen easy knocked Owen out of at least ten sheep a day.

"I'll say this for Chris Jensen—he could sure shear. He was not a steady plugger like Owen. He'd go in an' shear like a wild man for a couple o' hours an' then stretch out on the wool sacks to rest for an hour, but while he was at it I never saw a man faster.

It was a race between Owen an' the big Dane from the start. Of course we knew there would be a few shearers at other corrals after that prize money, but I couldn't see how anybody could beat the best one of them two. Owen made a mistake at the start. A man has to ease himself into a graft of that kind gradual or his back goes back on him. The first day he knocked out a hundred and eighty-eight. The next day he only got one seventy-five, an' in a big effort to make it back the next day he struck his two hundred—an' had to lay off all the next day. When he started in again he started in right—a hundred an' a quarter the first day an' increased it twenty-five each day till he hit his stride an' was toughened into it. But by that time Chris Jensen had a hundred an' fifty fleeces to the good.

Then, just when it looked like Owen was goin' to begin to gain, the Sanpeters handed us another jolt that come near bein' a knock-out. For some days we noticed that our combs an' cutters came back from the grinder in poor condition. We both knew it was hard to keep the cutters from bein' burned on the emery wheel, but Larsen was drawin' fifteen dollars a day an' was supposed to be an expert.

At first we only asked the Dane to be more careful but he only grinned, an' the grindin' got worse. You simply have to have sharp tools to cut through a lot o' dirty, gummy wool. When you start a long sweep around a sheep's ribs an' your machine sings through with a sweet little purr you feel like humpin' yourself. But when it goes a few inches an' clogs, an' a few more an' clogs, an' the pullin' makes your animal begin to fight an' kick—well, you can imagine it.

Owen goes to Larsen once more.

"Me an' Bill will grind our own tools after this," he says.

It would mean the loss of half an hour each day an' he knew it.

"Yuh can't use this wheel, yuh big stiff," says Larsen.

I looked for Owen to land on him, but the big feller just walked away with a hopeless droop of his shoulders.

We went to Dad Shipman about it, an' I'll tell the world we had to swaller a whole lot o' pride to do it, but even that didn't do no good. Corral bosses ain't in the habit o' interferin' with shearers' quarrels.

"If yuh don't like the kind o' grindin' yuh git yuh can quit," he says bluntly.

We went back to work with our dull tools an' said nothin'. At first mine were a bit better than Owen's till the Sanpeters learned I was exchangin' with Owen. Then there was no difference. Except for that third day's shearin' Owen never got his two hundred while big Chris went over the line every day. The persecution from the Sanpeters never ceased. When they knew Owen wouldn't fight they carried it on in the cook-shack an' the bunk tents. It got so we had to slink around like a pair o' coyotes. Our only hope was that our ways would soon part. The run at Dad Shipman's only lasted three weeks, an' we hoped our trails an' the Sanpeters wouldn't cross again.

When we got through big Chris had a mighty fat lead, but Owen was tickled as a boy with a new saddle when he found we was done with the Sanpeters for a while. They went to a corral near St. George in southern Utah, an' we headed into southern Nevada for a long run of desert sheep that were mostly bare-bellies.

"If you'd took time to licked Chris Jensen at the start you'd have been ahead of him now," I said.

"What if he has got a lead of three hundred head. It's only a day an' a half's shearin'. It's better this way. Even if I'd licked Chris I'd have likely got laid out by Pete Jensen an' Larsen an' the others. All I'm askin' for is that we ain't booked at any other corral where they shear," Owen says.

I shut up. It was somethin' of a slam on me, but then I knew I stood no chance against any of them big Danes.

WE WERE at that corral till nearly the first o' May, an' how we did shear! It was a wonderful Spring; scarcely any storm, an' no dew on the wool to hold us back an hour or two in the mornin' as sometimes happened farther north. Owen

was scratchin' 'em out at an average o' two-twenty-five a day, which is some shearin' if you ask me. Three different days he went over his own record without hurtin' himself. Once he hit two-fifty-nine, an' was too dog tired to git the one more that would make an even number.

Our next job was in Utah, an' Owen was in a state o' nerves till he found the Sanpete bunch wasn't there. But they were at another corral not ten mile away, an' we were doomed to see a lot more of 'em.

At our corral was another longstriker, a man named Riggins, a clean-cut shearer who was runnin' strong for that prize money. The first day we checked up an' Owen had a lead over Riggins of just four sheep. Riggins got a pen on the other side of Owen from me an' those two watched each other like hawks. That kind o' competition was good for 'em both. Some days Owen would lead; some days Riggins, dependin' on which got the best sheep, an' the wranglers was square.

Then, one Sunday, the Sanpeters came over to our corral in a body. A bunch of us was takin' a sun-bath on top of a stack o' filled wool sacks piled fifteen high when they drove up. Big Chris Jensen climbed outa the wagon an' climbs up the rick o' sacks till he was just below us.

"Well, yuh big boob," he says to Owen, "you still tryin' to shear sheep?"

"I'm shearin' a few I reckon," Owen says slowly.

"I've heard that you've been bribin' wranglers over in Nevada to load your pen with bare-bellies," Jensen says. "What was the best you done over there?"

Owen went pale an' there was a tremble in his voice that the Sanpeters thought meant that he was afraid. I didn't think so, but events proved they was right.

"I never bribed no wranglers. I took what was give to me, an' one day I got two hundred an' fifty-nine," he says.

BIG Chris turned red.

"You're a liar," he bellered. "Yuh never seen the day you could shear as many sheep as I can, an' the best I ever got was two-forty-eight. An' you're a liar when yuh say yuh never bribed no wranglers. At Dad Shipman's you tried to bribe Larsen here to gyp my combs an' cutters. He says yuh did."

That was what you'd have to call the limit — accusin' Owen of the very things he'd done himself. An' there was Larsen grinning like a Chessy cat. The only thing to do about it was to fight—an' that Owen wouldn't do.

"You're mistaken, Jensen," was all he said.

"Don't tell me I'm mistaken," Jensen howled, an' he swarms up the wool sacks an' grabs Owen by the leg.

The next second Owen goes a bumpin' down the end o' that pile o' wool sacks on his head.

An' he took it.

Riggins walked away without a word, but he was lookin' queer. The way he sized it up Owen was crooked or he wouldn't have took what he did take. Thereafter he never spoke to either of us. I think that hurt Owen worse than the disgrace of bein' dragged by the heels by Chris Jensen.

When we finished up in that corral Owen had just seven more sheep for the season than Riggins. On the fifth of June we pulled into George Buell's corral on the Blackfoot for the final six weeks' run. Riggins had come that far with us because he was booked to shear at Browne's corral eighteen miles farther on. We had learned at Soda Springs that Browne had ten or twelve thousand less sheep to shear than Buell had, an' that meant good-by to Riggins' chances unless he could change his bookin' to Buell's. He learned mighty quick that there was no chance.

An' then we seen that the whole bunch o' Sanpeters was on deck at Buell's.

"Tell you what I'll do, Riggins," Owen speaks up quick. "I'll change jobs with you."

Riggins looks up suspicious. I can see he's thinkin' o' that charge o' crookedness that Jensen had made an' which Owen had took. As he figgered it Owen was makin' the offer so he could pull somethin' crooked up at Browne's. But with a three day shorter run up there Riggins knew his own chances were gone.

"I'll take you on if I lose," he said, an' the change was made.

Of course I had to change bookin's with Riggins' pardner, an we went up the country another eighteen miles. An' them Sanpeters jeered as long as we could hear 'em.

It sure looked like a fool thing to do. Of

course we didn't know how many sheep Chris had sheared, but it was a cinch that Riggins' would git any way five hundred down at Buell's after we were all through.

We hammered away for six weeks on sheep that were mostly close-wools an' hard to shear, an' we knew that Buell had landed at least one big job o' loose-wools when he got a hundred thousand belongin' to the Idaho Sheep Company. Yet all the time Owen was holdin' his average up to the two hundred an' ten he'd set himself at the start.

He was livin' close, spendin' so little money at the commissary that he got a reputation as a tight-wad as well as a coward an' a crook, for the corral gossip of every place we'd worked had follered us, but it looked like he was goin' to pull down the four thousand dollars he'd set himself to make by shearin'. It sure looked like he'd have to go without that thousand dollar bonus, though, for when we settled up at Browne's we learned that Buell still had three day's shearin'.

"Well, good-by, bonus," I said while we was packin' our stuff after supper. "But you done mighty well as it was."

"If I don't win that bonus I'd as well not have made a dollar," Owen says grimly, "but I ain't give up makin' that prize yet."

Well, we packed our junk, an' hired a wagon to drive us down to Buell's corral that night, an' when the cook commenced hammerin' his breakfast call on the triangle we was ready to file in. We went around the end of a long table an' filed in on a bench, an' it so happened that Owen was next to Riggins.

"How you been comin?" Owen asks Riggins.

Riggins was sure packin' a grouch.

"Don't talk to me, —— yuh," he snarls.

"What's the matter?" Owen persists. "You got the best o' the trade didn't you with three more days to go. You sure ought to git a lead on me in that time. How many you got?"

"I got just four thousand two hundred an' forty-one outa thirty-five an' a half day's shearin'," Riggins grunts.

It wasn't much better than I'd done myself.

"Why, I've got seventy-four twenty-eight in that time," Owen says.

He done a bit o' quick figgerin'.

"Why that puts me twenty-one hundred an' ninety-four fleeces ahead o' you."

"It does, an' you knew——well it would when yuh wanted to change bookin's with me," Riggins snapped.

JUST then the Sanpeters come filin' in to breakfast, an' Riggins gives 'em a glance plumb full o' pizen hate. It was plain to tell, then, what had happened. That Sanpeter bunch had give Riggins exactly the same kind of a deal they'd give Owen at Dad Shipman's. There was more excuse for Riggins takin' it because he wasn't a big man.

Just then big Chris Jensen's eyes lighted on us an' the big yaller-haired gorilla pulled his face into a scowl an' sings out—

"What you wool-pickers mean comin' in here eatin' with the men?"

Wool-pickers are the guys who scour the ranges pickin' the wool off the sheep that die on the range. Lower'n that it's hard fer a man to fall.

Big Chris is comin' down toward us on the opposite side of the table an' he's backed up by his cousin Pete, an' Larsen the grinder.

"I'll give you a hundred dollars for the use of your pen the rest o' the run," Owen whispers to Riggins.

It was more than Riggins could make a-shearin', an' he was definitely out of the prize contest.

"I'll take it," he says.

Big Chris stops directly opposite us, an' leans across the table till his ugly mug is right over our plates.

"How many sheep you claim to a-sheared?" he snorts.

Owen gives him the total figgers, an' adds that they're backed up by the papers of the boss of every corral where we've worked.

Jensen went red, an' somebody at the other end o' the table sings out—

"He got yuh skinned just ninety-eight head, Chris."

"What of it?" roars big Chris. "I've got three days to shear, an' he's through."

"I'm still shearin'," Owen says mildly. "I just bought Riggins' pen for the rest o' the season."

Big Chris lets out a howl, an' for a minute he acts like he's goin' to come square over the table.

"Look here, you crook," he yells, "yuh don't shear in this corral—not a sheep."

"The only man can stop me is George

Buell, an' I reckon he won't care if Riggins is willin' to give up his job to me," Owen says, an' for the first time in months there's a kind of ring in his voice, but at that it don't ring just true to me.

"What about it, Buell?" Jensen demands.

"He can shear," Buell says. "All I'm interested is in gittin' through. An' as far as that prize money you fellers is after is concerned it's to encourage every man that's after it to hump himself for the whole season. Davis has got a right to buy a job if he wants to."

"There's this much about it, Jensen," Owen speaks up quietly. "If you start a fight at this stage of the game I'll guarantee that whether you lick me or not you won't be able to shear for three days, an' I'll be ahead of you if I don't win that bonus."

Big Chris rocked back an' forth on his feet tryin' to make up his mind. He never was a fast thinker, but it finally leaked into his mind that there was somethin' in it. Furthermore, him an' the whole Sanpete bunch had bet a lot o' money that he'd pull down the prize. An' Owen, as he stood there smilin' across the table wasn't easy-lookin' to tackle. He was a different looker to the man who'd been drug off the wool sacks by his heels. Then big Pete, who was really the brains o' the bunch, nudged Chris an' he started to set down.

Owen speaks again:

"Buyin' Riggins' job has set me back some, an' I need the money. I'll bet you five hundred dollars I shear more sheep for the season's run than you do."

Again Peter give Chris a nudge an' the bet was made. In one way it looked like a good bet for Owen considerin' that lead of ninety-eight he had to start with. But when you considered that sullen lookin' bunch o' Sanpeters that lead looked less than nothin'. That was the fact of it, Owen had the whole bunch of 'em to beat.

I FIGGERED that what Owen got at Dad Shipman's wouldn't be more'n to what he'd git here, an' I figgered correct. The very first bunch Owen got in his pen were culls, an' big Chris's were almost exclusively bare-bellies. The first batch o' cutters sent to Larsen to grind come back to Owen in worse shape than when he sent 'em.

But for once Owen was prepared. He simply laid the dull ones aside an' produced a fresh package. He'd simply bought up all the combs an' cutters at the other corral when Browne finished up, and had paid the grinder up there to put 'em in razor shape. He was heeled for tools for the three days.

It started out to be a real race. Both of 'em were tough as whale-bone, an Chris had quit layin' on the wool sacks. The way those two big boys humped over an' sheared was a sight to watch. It seemed that they would no more than ketch a biddy by the leg than they were turnin' her loose with the wool off. It looked like the first day would tell the story; whether Jensen, with the aid of his crooked wranglers could cut down Owen's lead in the three days left to shear.

For all his hurry Owen was careful. He seldom cut a sheep, while Jensen was turnin' 'em loose drippin' blood. No serious cuts you understand, but just patches o' hide ripped off where he'd got a mite too deep. Finally the owner made a complaint an' George Buell told the big Sanpeter straight out he had to do better or quit. He could take no chances on gettin' fired at that stage o' the game, an' it slowed him up.

The finish o' the first day showed Owen with a tally of two hundred an' twelve an' Jensen with one-ninety-five. That put it squarely up to the Sanpeters to pull something crooked if they beat Owen. As a rule the shearers an' the wranglers were left strictly alone, but there were limits they dassn't go over. They dassn't keep a shearer waitin' for sheep, nor a shearer dassn't git too rough on his sheep.

The next day saw the Sanpete wranglers under Pete Jensen pullin' every single thing they could pull without gittin' themselves fired, an' still big Chris couldn't lessen that gap much between 'em. I never saw Owen shear so before. He swung that old Stewart back an' forth as steady an' as reg'lar as a pendulum on a clock. Sweat rolled off him in streams. He had put on a new under shirt to shear in that morning, an' by nine o'clock it was so stiff with sweat an' grease that it crackled like broken pasteboard with every move.

"If he holds the pace," said Riggins, who had stayed to see the finish, "he'll have two-twenty-five by night, an' Jensen can't beat that even with the bare-bellies he's a drawin'."

At noon big Chris had only gained two fleeces. Before they went back to work, I

saw the Sanpeters talkin' together an' I knew somethin' was sure to happen. Everybody was watchin' the shearers an' the wranglers, for Pete wasn't even makin' a pretense to be fair. George Buell was watchin' like a hawk to see that Owen's pen was kept full o' somethin' with wool on, but everybody'd neglected the other chute where the clipped ones went out. Even Fox, the owner, and his men were watchin' the shearin' until a small bunch pen was filled up.

Finally Fox an' his camp-mover strolled over to the bunch pen with their brandin' sticks an' pots o' paint to daub a green "F" on the sheared sheep. An' a minute later Fox let out a yell, an' come carryin' a fine young ewe with one hind leg all but cut off. The whole flank had been ripped open an' the cut went on around the hip joint as neat as a butcher would have done it, as near as you could tell for the blood.

In a minute a dozen of us had collected around Buell an' the sheepman. A head above the rest was Pete Jensen. The sheepman jerks out his knife an' cuts the ewe's throat to save it further sufferin'.

"Either you fire the man that done that, or I'll pull every sheep outa this corral," Fox declares grimly.

The sheepman was justified. You have to watch shearers every minute or when they git to longstrikin' they'll just about take the hide off a sheep as well as the wool in their hurry to make a big tally. If examples wasn't made of some of 'em it would be fierce. Fox couldn't ignore a thing like that, an Buell couldn't afford to have his last job walk out on him.

"Who done that?" Buell asks Pete Jensen.

THE boss wrangler was the one man in a position to know.

"That one come from Davis's pen," he said without a blink.

"Come over here, Davis," Buell yells, an' Owen turns loose a sheep half-sheared an' comes over.

"You're fired, Davis, I can't stand for work like this," Buell says, pointin' at the dead ewe.

I never see such a look come over a man's face as come over Owen's then. He'd disconnected his Stewart machine from the power rod, an' he drawed it back like he meant to ram somebody with it. Let me tell you that one o' those machines with the long, steel-toothed combs could just about make mince-meat of any man's face.

"The man that says I done that is a liar," Owen says just above a whisper, an' with a glare at Pete Jensen that made the big Sanpeter back up among his friends who had clustered around.

An' then here comes big Chris shoulderin' his way through the crowd, an' he has his Stewart machine in his hand. I shudders when I think of what might happen if them two big boys should mix things with them machines in their hands. An' it looks at last like Owen had played his last card an' was ready to fight.

"I say you done it—I counted it out o' your pen," Pete Jensen says, but he backs up between Chris an' Larsen, an' there's three other Sanpeters right behind.

Again Owen draws back his arm. There's sure a murderous look on his face, but he seems tryin' to keep control of himself. Suddenly he brings his arm ahead an' throws that Stewart machine as far as it'll sail. An' then his face contorts like a mad-man's.

Before big Chris knew what was happenin' Owen was on him. The first blow sent the big Dane sprawlin' for twenty feet. As Owen follered him up Larsen swung on him, an' the wallop took Owen fair on the side o' the head. It knocked him sideways for a dozen feet, but it never stopped him. Then Pete Jensen, a bigger man than Owen, tackled him, but with a toss like a wild bull Owen threw him off.

The delay give big Chris time to git on his feet, an' as they come together he swung that murderous lookin' Stewart machine. The blade caught Owen on the shoulder an' traveled down his arm to the elbow. Just a second you could see the red furrows where those comb teeth tore into the flesh an' then blood squelched through in streams like there was a force pump behind it.

An' then Owen had seized Jensen's wrist, an' his other hand traveled up, not more than a foot, it seemed, until it struck big Chris under the jaw. The big Dane went off the ground a foot, an' his head popped back till it seemed like human bone couldn't stand it without breakin'.

With two such giants fightin' like madmen the battle couldn't last long. Almost at once Owen twisted the machine out of Chris's hand, an' then he got over another mighty punch to the jaw an' the big Dane

slumped like a sack o' straw. He was whipped, but Owen wasn't done. The film was in his eyes again, an' if he didn't intend to kill him, he did intend to stop him from shearin' sheep.

I'd heard o' men wipin' up the earth with a man, but there I actually saw it. Owen picked up the Sanpeter an' crashed him against the board fence on one side o' the chute, an' three whole panels went down in the crash. He throwed him, jerked him, shook him, mauled him, and finally fastened on his throat with the blood-thirsty ferocity of a bull-dog. The Sanpeters knew he was killing big Chris, but though they had fully intended to gang up on Owen if the going got rough for Chris, they just stood back in a sort of dumb terror with their mouths open. There was something paralyzing about such ferocity.

Any of the rest of us would have interfered if we had known how, but he didn't seem to hear what we said, and the only way to get him loose was to knock him cold or kill him, and some way everybody waited for the other fellow and nobody went for a club. And then a wool-buyer by the name of Reynolds suddenly shouldered his way through the crowd.

"Owen!" he yelled. "Owen, have you forgotten Mamie York—Mamie York."

For a second it seemed that the words, whatever they might mean, had failed to sink into Owen's brain; then his fingers slowly began to relax, and Chris Jensen's blackened face began to get some color as his respiratory organs again began to function. The insane look on Owen's face began to pass away like fog lifting slowly from a hill-top. He got to his feet and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. Then he reached out sort of impulsively and shook hands with Reynolds, and started toward our tent.

"One minute," Buell says. "Look at the ragged edges of this cut where I've wiped the blood away. It never was done with no machine. If I ain't a liar it was done with a pair of old-fashioned blade shears."

WE ALL saw Pete Jensen turn pale, an' there was a rush toward the chute where the sheared sheep were turned loose. Shoved down between a couple of boards was a pair o' blade shears with the blood on 'em still sticky. It was all plain enough. After Owen's pen of woolies were turned out Pete had caught one and maimed it so that Owen would get the blame.

Buell made a sign toward his office an' the Sanpete bunch trailed over to git their time. After what had happened they was gittin' off easy, and they didn't even chirp when Buell announced that they'd lost their bet to Owen.

There was nothin' to keep Owen from goin' in an' shearin' if he felt like it, an' after I'd bandaged that bleeding arm of his he went in an' knocked out seventy head that afternoon. It was lucky that he did, for a few weeks later we learned that he had won that prize by havin' just fifteen more fleeces than the next best shearer of the season, a fellow by the name of Thompson whom we'd only seen once or twice. And the next mornin' that arm was swelled to twice its natural size, an' he couldn't raise it. What he suffered with it that afternoon nobody knows.

Naturally everybody was crazy to know what Reynolds had meant by his reference to Mamie York. To do the wool-buyer credit he wouldn't say a word until Owen give him permission. We learned at the same time that Reynolds was the man who was keeping an eye on the shearin' contest because he was a friend of the sheepman who was puttin' up the prize money, an' because his business took him to every corral in the country.

"Mamie York," says Reynolds, "is the widow of a man who Owen Davis killed with his two hands after York had pulled a gun on him. The fellow had it coming to him and Owen was acquitted on the grounds of self-defense. I happened to be at the trial and I remembered today how all broke up Owen was every time he'd look at the widow an' her three kids. I had a hunch."

But it was a long time later before I knew why Owen needed that five thousand dollars so bad. I got the explanation in a letter which Owen wrote me sayin' he was done shearin' for life.

"There's too many chances to quarrel, and I go plumb crazy. The jury said I had a right to kill York, but I know a —— sight better. If it hadn't been for that fool temper of mine I could have licked him and let it go at that. The man had a family left without a provider, and worse than that they owed five thousand dollars on their home that they had to pay by the first of August or lose, and the widow couldn't make it. Wasn't it up to me, I ask you that?"

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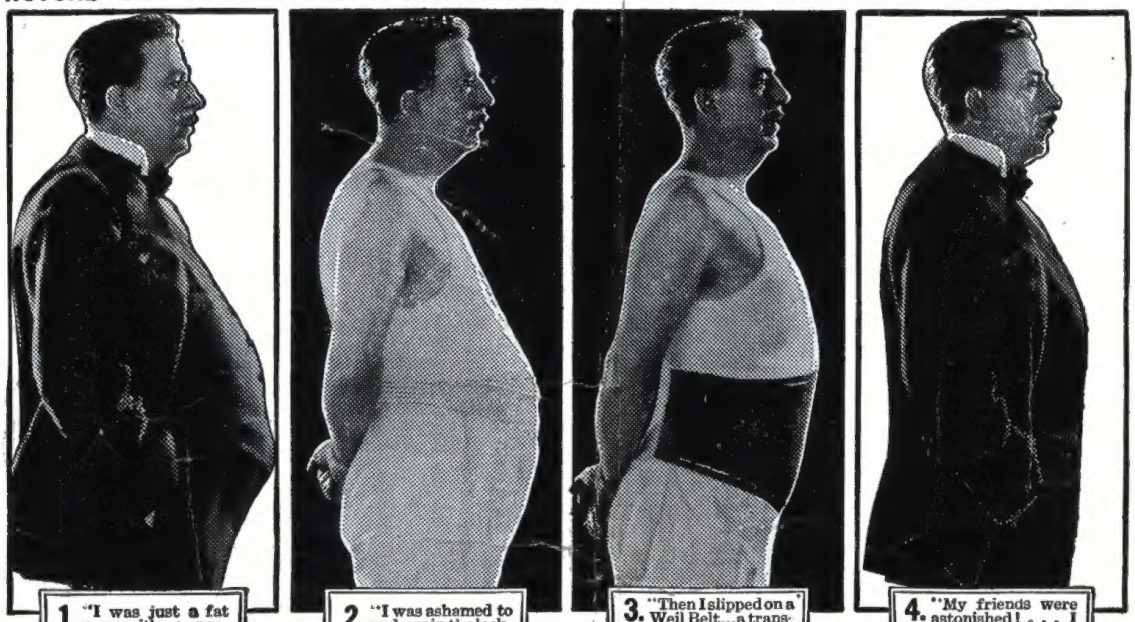

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We are so sure that you will reduce your waistline at least *three* inches that we make this unqualified agreement...

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The Weil Reducing Belt will make you appear many inches slimmer at once, and in 10 short days if your waistline is not actually 3 inches smaller—three inches of fat gone—it won't cost you one cent!

It supports the sagging muscles of the abdomen and quickly gives an erect, athletic carriage.

Don't be embarrassed any longer with that "corporation" for in a short time, only the admiring comments of your friends will remind you that you once had a bulging waistline.

SAFE, QUICK REDUCTION

You will be completely comfortable as the gentle pressure and massage-like action of your Weil Belt persistently eliminates fat as you work, walk or sit.

Many enthusiastic wearers write that when the abdominal walls are returned to normal position, indigestion and constipation are greatly relieved and that with loss of fat comes increased endurance and vigor.

DON'T WAIT—FAT IS DANGEROUS!

Fat is not only unbecoming, but it also endangers your health. Insurance companies know the danger of fat accumulations. The best medical authorities warn against obesity, so don't wait any longer.

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Use coupon or write your name and address on penny post card.

FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT

Send Coupon
Don't Pay Until Relieved

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

Beware Of It Spreading

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

Here's How To Treat It

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 20 minutes of boiling to kill the germ; so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the tissue of the skin where the germ breeds.

Itching Stops Immediately

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

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GORE PRODUCTS, INC. M.S.
895 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a complete treatment for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE .....